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Richard Bilton, BSc (Hons)

Communication, Collaboration and Control: Investigating
Conversations Between Parents and Teachers in an
English Secondary School

Thesis submitted for the award of Doctor of Philosophy in
accordance with University of Cumbria Procedures and in
compliance with Lancaster University Regulations

December 2017

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Previous Publications

The following peer-reviewed journal articles have resulted from the research outlined in this thesis. Both these articles are based solely on the work generated through my doctoral thesis and were written by myself, with Alison Jackson and Barry Hymer reviewing drafts and providing critical feedback.

Bilton, R., Jackson, A. and Hymer, B. (2017) 'Not Just Communication – Parent-Teacher Conversations in an English High School', *School Community Journal*, 27(1), pp. 231-256.

Bilton, R., Jackson, A. and Hymer, B. (2017) 'Cooperation, conflict and control: parent–teacher relationships in an English secondary school', *Educational Review*, pp. 1-17. Available at: .
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2017.1410107> (Accessed: 14 February 2018)

Acknowledgements

I have never tried my hand at white-water rafting, nor do I expect I ever will. It is perhaps surprising, therefore, that the PhD process has repeatedly called this image to my mind. At times, I have felt swept along in directions that I could not have foreseen by currents stronger than I had anticipated. On other occasions, I have pictured myself being thrown into the icy water and dashed onto the rocks. Happily, I have not had to negotiate these hazards – imagined or otherwise – alone. Indeed, a wide range of individuals have accompanied me, to whom I would like to express my gratitude. Firstly, I would like to thank those parents, teachers and students who so willingly participated in my research. Your conversations and interviews provided me with a wealth of data, without which my investigation would not have been possible. I'm particularly grateful in this respect to the teaching staff at my school. Your thoughtful and honest responses to my questions significantly enhanced the ways in which I was able to interpret my data. My thanks also go to my supervisors, Alison Jackson, Barry Hymer and (latterly) Paul Cammack. Our face-to-face meetings were both encouraging and enjoyable, whilst your forthright comments and challenges stimulated my thinking and caused me to raise the standard of my game. I would also like to thank the Senior Leadership Team at my school. You not only facilitated my research but your practical advice during the early stages of my research greatly contributed to the success of my study. Finally, I would like to thank my long-suffering wife and children. Your patience and good humour through the long years of my research far exceeded that which I could have reasonably requested.

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Richard Bilton

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Abstract

Parent-teacher meetings are well-established and attended by a high proportion of parents. This places significant demands on both schools and families. However, little research involving direct observation within secondary schools has been reported.

I have investigated parent-teacher meetings at one English secondary school, my aims being to explore the aims of parents and teachers and the nature of their relationships. My findings will be of interest to parents and teachers, as well as researchers and school leaders.

I collected audio recordings of parent-teacher conversations over two years and conducted one-to-one interviews with parents, students and teachers. I analysed my data using conversation analysis and interpreted my findings using politeness theory.

I found that the aims of parents and teachers can be divided into two categories. Instrumental aims are directly concerned with educational outcomes, whereas interpersonal aims relate to the individual needs of the participants and do not necessarily affect students' learning.

I also found that the behaviour of the participants in my study was not consistent with models based on partnership, opposition, or market forces. My

findings do, however, support a model in which teachers assume the role of 'expert' and control conversations.

For researchers, my findings question the way in which Epstein's typology is used to classify parent-teacher meetings and suggest that the presence of students during meetings may be significant. My study has also highlighted politeness theory as a useful tool for interpreting parent-teacher behaviour.

For families and schools, my research raises questions regarding the use of parent-teacher meetings to influence students. My study also suggests that parents and teachers do not make productive use of their limited contact time.

My study provides up-to-date and reliable data regarding a widespread educational practice. My methodology may also provide a useful template for researchers wishing to investigate parent-teacher conversations.

Future research involving contrasting schools would indicate whether my findings were context-related or more general. The occupational backgrounds of parents and the roles played by students may also be worthy of further investigation.

Chapter 1 – Introduction

My principal aims in this opening chapter are to provide a rationale for my study, to make clear what my research questions are and how these came about, and to provide a general overview of my thesis structure. I also aim to generate interest in what – for me – has been a most absorbing exploration of a seldom-seen world. In the first section, I introduce myself, outline my personal reasons for undertaking doctoral research and explain why I chose this particular field of study. The next section then makes the case for conducting research which focuses on parent-teacher conversations at an English secondary school. I then go on to state my research questions and explain how these came about. In the final section, I provide an overview of my study by briefly summarising the content of each chapter. Throughout my thesis, the word ‘school’ refers to state-funded secondary schools within England. To avoid confusion, I will describe both parents’ evening meetings (England) and parent-teacher conferences (US and elsewhere) as parent-teacher meetings. I will also use the word ‘student’ rather than ‘pupil’ since this appears to be the term more commonly used within the research literature.

1.1 Personal Reasons

Before I go on to justify my decision to study the conversations between parents and teachers at the school in which I teach, I will first of all explain my personal reasons for choosing to undertake doctoral research. Having successfully established myself in my teaching career, I was faced with a

dilemma. On the one hand, I felt the need for a fresh challenge, something that would stimulate my thinking and take my professional life in a new direction. On the other, I had no wish to leave the classroom and was not attracted to a career path involving administrative responsibilities or school leadership. In the autumn of 2009, I came across a most satisfactory solution to this problem. As part of my on-going professional development, I embarked on a part-time course – one afternoon each week – at my local university. After many years of ‘hands-on’ teaching, this return to academic study proved to be a refreshing and enjoyable diversion, and I was pleasantly surprised to find that I was still able to meet the demands of formal learning. Perhaps more importantly, researching and writing about educational issues in depth caused me to think in new ways about my professional practice and renewed my motivation to teach. It thus seemed only natural to pursue my studies further. To suggest, however, that my decision to undertake doctoral research was based solely on this positive learning experience would be but to tell only part of the story. Before I had completed my course, my life was changed irrevocably when I became a parent for the first time. Welcome as this event was, I will confess to feelings of doubt and anxiety with regard to the changes it would bring. I had previously enjoyed a relatively unrestricted lifestyle and felt reluctant to surrender myself completely to the responsibilities of parenthood. Educational research thus provided me with a timely opportunity – readily seized – to preserve a part of my life that would belong only to me.

Whilst not readily apparent to me at the time, it seems clear now that I was seeking an area of enquiry that would relate to both my professional role as a

teacher and my newly-acquired status as a parent. When I came across a paper by MacLure and Walker (2000) entitled 'Disenchanted Evenings: The Social Organization of Talk in Parent-Teacher Consultations in U.K. Secondary Schools', I realised that I had found the research topic I was looking for. In practical terms, their study pointed me towards an important gap in the published literature relating to parent-teacher meetings – see section 1.2. It also provided me with a methodological template that I could use as a starting point for the design of my own research (section 3.4), as well as a theoretical lens through which to view the complex workings of parent-teacher meetings – see section 2.3.3. Perhaps more importantly, MacLure and Walker's interpretation of the relationships between parents and teachers engaged me at an emotional level, though in seemingly contradictory ways. On the one hand, their view of parent-teacher relationships seemed cynical and provoked my indignation. This caused me to initially reject their conclusions, a response that I will readily attribute to my personal bias. On the other hand, their language vividly captured the nervousness and tension I felt as a teacher when speaking to parents. Indeed, I was relieved to discover that others had also found these events to be problematic. My feelings and curiosity thus aroused, I determined to learn more about the nature of parent-teacher meetings at my school.

1.2 Rationale

Had my interest in parent-teacher conversations been merely a personal matter then my enquiries might have been adequately conducted informally

and my findings shared only with those individuals directly involved. There are, however, several reasons, which I will outline below, why this area of educational research merits both a more rigorous approach and the attention of a wider audience.

Parent-teacher meetings are significant

Whilst schools in England are not legally required to stage parent-teacher meetings, they are both widespread and well-established throughout the education system. They have, in Walker's words, 'acquired via custom and practice the status of contractual obligation' (1998, p.164). Moreover, formal meetings between parents and teachers in one form or another are an established practice within education systems worldwide (Lemmer, 2012 – South Africa; Matthiesen, 2015 – Denmark; Pillet-Shore, 2015 – USA).

According to Peters et al. (2008), who conducted a survey of the parents of English secondary school students, these events are typically attended by a high proportion of parents, in keeping with my own experience as a teacher. Indeed, in a survey I conducted as part of my master's degree, 94% of parents at my school stated that they regularly participated in parent-teacher meetings. Taken as a whole, this amounts to a considerable investment of time and effort for parents, teachers and schools. Perhaps more importantly, these meetings offer parents and teachers 'a rare opportunity for mutual advice and support' (Walker, 1998, p.164) and have been described as 'an indispensable tool for strengthening the home-school link in the best interest of the child' (Lemmer, 2012, p.94). However, they can be tense, stressful

occasions (MacLure and Walker, 2000; Graham-Clay, 2005) and often cause parents to feel frustrated or dissatisfied (Walker, 1998; Inglis, 2012; Lemmer, 2012). I would therefore argue that further research evidence is needed if the considerable resources being channelled into parent-teacher meetings and the demands these events place on those directly involved are to be justified.

Limited previous research

A second reason for investigating the conversations which take place between parents and teachers is the lack of previously reported research. MacLure and Walker have described parent-teacher meetings as ‘something of a “black hole” in our understanding of educational practices’ (2000, p.5). However, their study appears to be the only work to have been conducted in an English secondary school in the last fifteen years. Significant changes have taken place in the U.K. educational landscape during this time, with increased parental control of school decision-making, stronger inspection regimes and the consolidation of existing market-based policy reforms (Gillard, 2004). It could be argued that such developments might have altered the nature of parent-teacher conversations. More up-to-date research has been reported (e.g. Weininger and Lareau, 2003; Cheatham and Ostrosky, 2011; Pillet-Shore, 2012), though this has tended to focus on early years education or primary schools in non-English contexts. These settings may not necessarily be relevant to teachers and researchers concerned with parent-teacher conversations in English secondary schools.

Limitations of interview data

There have been few published studies based on the direct observation of parent-teacher meetings. This is understandable given the ‘formidable barriers to observation’ with regard to access and confidentiality (Weininger and Lareau, 2003, p.377), as well as the significant practical challenges associated with recording conversations in a crowded school hall – see section 3.4. Most previously reported studies have been based primarily on data generated from interviews. These have provided valuable insights regarding the views of the participants and their conversational aims (Attanucci, 2004; Ranson, Martin and Vincent, 2004; Katyal and Evers, 2007; Tveit, 2009; Westergard and Galloway, 2010; Inglis, 2012 and 2014). For example, Attanucci’s extended interview with a teacher who had felt aggrieved following a conversation with a parent revealed an ‘inner reality’ that was ‘left unspoken’ at the time and so could not have been discerned from the transcript alone. However, it could be argued that such evidence carries with it certain limitations with regard to researcher bias (Schegloff, 1997) and reliability (Cameron, 2001). It is possible, for example, that participants might have an agenda of their own that could prevent them from openly revealing their thoughts and feelings – see section 3.4. There is thus a need to complement such studies with research based on recorded conversations of routine encounters between parents and teachers. My study will respond to this need by combining data generated through direct recordings with ethnographic evidence from a range of secondary sources (section 3.5) and

may provide a useful template for other researchers to use when designing their own investigations.

Diverse theoretical approaches

A further justification for investigating parent-teacher meetings relates to the wide range of theoretical approaches used by researchers to interpret their data – see section 2.3 of my literature review. It would appear that very different – and not necessarily compatible – findings have emerged from studies based on different conceptual frameworks. MacLure and Walker (2000), for example, viewed parent-teacher conversations in terms of power differences and disciplinary control, thus placing the focus on conflict between parents and teachers. By contrast, Lemmer (2012) considered the student within a network of socially interconnected systems, leading her to emphasise the importance of direct two-way communication between home and school. These divergent interpretations may reflect genuine differences in the relationships between the parents and teachers within dissimilar contexts. It is possible, however, that the theories adopted by these researchers caused them to ‘see’ only certain behaviours and that their findings may have turned out differently had they utilised alternative approaches. Moreover, Jeynes (2011) has pointed to the limitations of existing theories which relate to parental involvement and called for new frameworks that can better explain the findings emerging from the most recent research. I would thus argue that there is a need for further enquiry into parent-teacher conversations which is not tied to any one particular theoretical perspective. This is the way I

approached my investigation, my aim being to critically assess the relative merits of differing theories – a point I will return to in section 7.2.

Inconsistent educational policy

Finally, it could be argued that research into parent-teacher meetings is worthwhile since this provides policy-makers and school leaders with potentially useful information. Involving parents has been a consistent theme within education policy for the last two decades, though successive governments appear to have adopted differing positions. In New Labour's White Paper entitled 'Excellence in Schools' (DfEE, 1997), for example, some parents seem to have been viewed as 'victims' in need of support from schools:

Parents are a child's first and enduring teachers. They play a crucial role in helping their children learn. Family learning is a powerful tool for reaching some of the most disadvantaged in our society.

DfEE, 1997, p.53

This statement suggests a 'deficit' model of involvement (cf. Edwards and Warin, 1999) in which parents are assumed to be unable or unwilling to meet the requirements of schools and teachers. Following re-election in 2001, however, New Labour appeared to have shifted its stance:

Of course, it is equally important that parents have good information about the schools in their area ... Parents need this information to help them decide on the best school or schools for their child.

DfES, 2001, p.66

The government's underlying philosophy thus appears to have moved away from social inclusion and towards parental choice, with parents being viewed as consumers within a market-based education system (cf. Hallgarten, 2000). At the start of their third term in office, however, New Labour had again shifted position:

Schools achieve most when they draw on real and effective parental engagement ... We need to harness the energy and commitment which parents can bring to shape the education their children receive and the progress of their school.

DfES, 2005, p.65

Parents were thus being viewed as a resource in the drive to raise standards, with parental involvement now being proposed as a way to raise attainment (cf. Feiler et al., 2006). A further change was seen following the election of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government in 2010:

Central to our approach is the need to make it easier for parents and the public to hold schools to account. In the past, too much information has been unavailable to parents, too difficult to find or not presented comprehensibly.

DfE, 2010, p.66

This signalled a move towards accountability and the empowerment of parents, in keeping with the view of parents as regulators of school performance (MacLure and Walker, 2000). The subsequent Conservative government further revised this area of policy, with the potential for parents to play an active role in their children's learning once again being recognised (DfE, 2016). It would thus appear that, whilst successive governments have consistently expressed their commitment to parental involvement, the reasons that they have used to justify this have changed. Indeed, it could be argued that strategies with regard to involvement have reflected political rather than educational thinking. Whilst this might be inevitable given the lack of available research evidence, I would argue that it does not necessarily result in the most effective policy. Research focusing on the ways in which parents and teachers interact would inform policy-makers and school leaders, thus enabling them to more effectively meet the needs of families and schools.

1.3 Research Aims and Questions

At the start of this chapter, I outlined my personal reasons for undertaking doctoral research and explained how MacLure and Walker had stimulated my thinking with regard to parent-teacher conversations. In this section, I will explain how this initial interest led to my research questions.

As a practising teacher, I have often found formal meetings with parents awkward or stressful – far more so than classroom teaching. Indeed, I have often felt that my attempts to communicate with parents have done more harm than good. Instances of forgetfulness or poor judgement on my part have been a cause of embarrassment, whilst the news I have been obliged to report has caused worry or provoked conflict between parent and child. MacLure and Walker's (2000) description of tension and personal risk during parent-teacher meetings thus called to mind these encounters and suggested that perhaps my difficulties were more commonplace than I had realised. This made me interested to learn about the experiences of other teachers within my school and caused me to realise that I had no knowledge of how my colleagues conducted their conversations with parents. Whilst classroom teaching might be regularly observed within English secondary schools, parent-teacher meetings are an essentially private world. The primary aim of my study was therefore to gain access to parent-teacher conversations involving other teachers within my workplace and so shed light on this seldom seen area of educational practice. I also hoped to provide the staff and senior leadership team at my school with helpful information, and – given the lack of published

research outlined in the previous section – to generate research data that might encourage others to investigate parent-teacher conversations. Additionally, I had been impressed with Pillet-Shore's rigorous use of conversational analysis to examine parent-teacher conversations in U.S. primary schools (section 2.3.5). Her brand of conversation analysis seemed to be a particularly effective way to determine what individuals were trying to do during parent-teacher meetings and to reveal the conversational tools that they used to accomplish their goals. My original research questions were thus as follows:

- What are the parents and teachers at my school trying to achieve when they engage in conversation during parent-teacher meetings?
- How do the parents and teachers at my school go about achieving their conversational aims?

In order to answer these questions, my intention had been simply to record conversations and identify any emerging patterns of talk. According to Miles and Huberman (1994), such an open-ended approach may well produce unexpected findings or interesting leads. This turned out to be the case in my study and, as my investigation unfolded, subsidiary questions frequently presented themselves which I subsequently pursued – see section 3.4. Moreover, as I read more about parent-teacher meetings, I was struck by the range of theoretical frameworks used by other researchers to describe the interactions between parents and teachers. These included notions of power

and disciplinary control (Foucault, 1980, cited in MacLure and Walker, 2000, p. 21), social reproduction theory (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990, cited in Weininger and Lareau, 2003, pp. 379-382), communicative action (Habermas, 1984, cited in Tveit, 2007, pp. 200-201), and politeness theory (Brown and Levinson, 1987, cited in Pillet-Shore, 2016, pp. 33-34). Each of these frameworks appeared to provide a different perspective on the nature of parent-teacher relationships and I became increasingly interested in finding out how they related to my own findings. This stimulated my thinking and caused the focus of my research to evolve in a direction that I had not anticipated. Whilst I had started out with the aim of investigating parent-teacher conversations to see what ‘turned up’, I realised that I was now more concerned with finding out how well these models could explain the relationships between parents and teachers in my workplace. Moreover, as I expanded my reading I became aware of theoretical frameworks that had not hitherto been associated with parent-teacher conversations. I therefore decided to add a further research question to my original ones:

- What can the talk observed between the parents and teachers at my school tell me about the nature of their relationships?

This latter question better reflects my developing interests – both as a researcher and as a practising teacher – during the analysis and interpretation stages of my study. Taken together, these three questions form the framework around which I have constructed my thesis.

1.4 Thesis Overview

In this section, I will preview the content and structure of the chapters that follow, my aim being to explain the purpose of the various parts of my thesis and to show how they fit together as an integrated whole.

Chapter 2 – Literature review

This chapter draws together the previously published research relevant to my study. Section 2.1 defines parental involvement, a wide-ranging term which includes meetings between parents and teachers, and describes Epstein's much-cited typology. In section 2.2, I then review the literature relating to involvement in order to place my study within its wider research context. Since this is a large and active field of research, I provide a general overview of the main schools of thought rather than a detailed treatment of individual studies. Section 2.3 is concerned with the research literature relating specifically to parent-teacher conversations. Since these studies are of direct relevance to my thesis, I consider the findings presented in greater detail. I also critically assess the methodologies and theoretical frameworks employed, and explain how these have informed the design of my own study. In section 2.4, I describe and critically consider a theoretical framework that I found particularly useful when explaining my findings.

Chapter 3 – Methodology and research design

The philosophy, research design and methods I have chosen to adopt are the subject of this chapter. Section 3.1 is concerned with the philosophical assumptions underlying my research. Section 3.2 explains the nature of case-study research and justifies my decision to adopt such an approach. In section 3.3, I provide details regarding the context of my research and the organisation of parent-teacher meetings at my school. Section 3.4 describes my sampling and data collection procedures and explains the thinking behind my choices. In section 3.5, I outline my approach to data analysis and justify my decision to adopt a methodology that has not been widely applied to parent-teacher conversations. Section 3.6 describes the different ways in which triangulation can be viewed and how these ideas have shaped my research. I also consider the potential for bias within my study, and outline the strategies that I used to become a more reflexive researcher. In section 3.7, I consider the ethical problems associated with practitioner research in a small school and outline the steps I took to avoid them or minimise their impact.

Chapter 4 – Findings

In this part of my thesis, I present those findings generated through my research which relate to my research questions. I organise these findings according to the major themes which emerged from my literature review, namely: 'Reporting Progress', 'Avoiding Harm', 'Managing Identity', 'Conversational Control', and 'Competition and Conflict'. I also introduce two

additional themes which relate to patterns of talk that have not been previously reported, these being: 'Influencing Students' and 'Friendliness and Support'. Throughout this chapter, I use relevant transcript excerpts to illustrate each major point, followed by a detailed analysis of the talk taking place. I also present interview evidence from parents, pupils and teachers where this provides useful insights into the thinking behind their talk.

Chapter 5 – Discussion

The purpose of this chapter is to link the findings which emerged from my investigation to the studies I considered in my literature review. Given my research questions, this chapter is divided into two major sections. Section 5.1 relates to my questions regarding the conversational aims of the parents and teachers in my study. In this section, I make the distinction between the 'instrumental' and 'interpersonal' aims of the participants. I also discuss in detail a pattern of talk which does not appear to have been previously reported. Section 5.2 is concerned with my research question regarding parent-teacher relationships. In this section, I discuss the evidence generated by my study for and against the various perspectives from which such relationships can be viewed. Throughout both sections, I utilise the concept of 'face' and politeness theory (section 2.4) to account for my findings where this seems appropriate.

Chapter 6 – Conclusions and recommendations

In this chapter, I respond to my research questions, highlight the implications of my study, and make recommendations for researchers and schools.

Section 6.1 forms more general conclusions with regard to my research questions, based on the discussion I presented in the previous chapter. In section 6.2, I then highlight the theoretical implications arising from my findings and suggest what future research might naturally follow. Section 6.3 considers the practical consequences for school leaders and teachers, as well as policy changes that they may wish to consider in order to improve the effectiveness of parent-teacher meetings.

Chapter 7 – Research quality and contribution

In this final chapter, I ‘step back’ and evaluate the quality of my research.

Section 7.1 outlines the contribution my study has made to current knowledge with regard to parent-teacher meetings. I also explain why my methodology might be useful for other researchers wishing to conduct further work in this area. In section 7.2, I consider the limitations of my study and describe the measures I undertook – or might have undertaken – to reduce them. Section 7.3 concludes my thesis by drawing together my rationale for investigating parent-teacher conversations and the contributions I have made to this field of study.

Chapter 2 – Literature Review

In this chapter, I will review the literature relevant to my thesis, my aims being to describe the term parental involvement, outline the broader research context within which my study is set, critically examine the empirical evidence directly relating to parent-teacher meetings, and introduce the theoretical framework that I will use to interpret my findings. Section 2.1 will be concerned with defining parental involvement – a necessary step as the term has not always been used consistently by researchers. Since Epstein's typology appears to be the most widely used within the field, this is where I will focus my attention. I will, however, briefly consider other ways to classify parental involvement. In section 2.2, I will review the wider involvement literature. My aim here will be to outline the differing schools of thought with regard to parental involvement and also locate the literature on parent-teacher meetings within this large and active field of study – see Desforges and Abouchaar (2003) for a more comprehensive literature review. Section 2.3 focuses on the published research which relates directly to face-to-face meetings between parents and teachers. I will organise this section according to the major themes as I see them: 'Organisation and Power'; 'Partnership'; 'Opposition'; 'Conversational Control'; and 'Harm Avoidance'. Since the studies in this section are both few in number and directly relevant to my thesis, I will consider them in greater detail than those relating to the wider field of parental involvement. In section 2.4, I will describe and critically consider the theoretical framework – politeness theory – that I have primarily used to interpret my findings.

2.1 Definitions and Typologies

Parental involvement can be defined as the allocation of resources by a parent towards the educational development of their child (Grolnick and Slowiaczek, 1994), though Kavanagh (2013) has noted that this general definition is of limited practical use. Several researchers have considered the different forms that parental involvement can take (Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003; Harris and Goodall, 2007). These include, for example, child-rearing activities, meeting teachers or support staff, attending school functions, and encouraging high educational expectations. A simple operational definition of parental involvement, however, has not always been clear, and early inconsistencies in the findings reported by researchers have been attributed to the fact that they were measuring different things in different ways (Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003). Moreover, this problem has been compounded by white, middle-class notions of 'parent' and 'family' (Wood and Warin, 2014). In this section, I will therefore make clear how I have defined parental involvement and where parent-teacher meetings fit within this field of study.

A much-cited typology

Epstein's typology has evolved over a period of several decades and has been the most commonly used starting point for researchers investigating parental involvement (Epstein, 2010). Epstein divided involvement into six distinct types, each being based on the actions undertaken by parents:

- (1) Parenting – creating a home environment that supports children’s learning or development.
- (2) Communicating – engaging in two-way information exchange between home and school.
- (3) Volunteering – assisting in the classroom, attending school functions and participating at fundraising activities.
- (4) Learning at home – supporting educational activities outside school, e.g. helping with homework or giving advice on educational issues.
- (5) Decision-making – participating in school governance or representing parents’ interests.
- (6) Collaborating with the community – utilising resources and services provided by local businesses, the church, or other organisations.

According to Epstein et al. (2002), each type of involvement presents particular challenges for its successful implementation and results in different outcomes for parents, students and teachers. Since parent-teacher meetings provide parents and teachers with an opportunity to meet face-to-face and exchange information, I would suggest that type 2 involvement – communication – relates most closely to my thesis. Indeed, Epstein has presented regular parent-teacher meetings based on the reciprocal exchange

of information as her foremost example of this type of involvement (Epstein, 2010, p.85). However, my research findings also indicate that parents assist teachers as they attempt to modify students' study habits or behaviour during meetings (section 4.2). I would thus suggest that type 3 involvement – volunteering and assisting – is also relevant to my thesis, a point I will return to in section 6.2.

Problems with Epstein's typology

Epstein's typology provides a practical framework for researchers which takes into account a wide range of parental practices. Its widespread adoption has also facilitated consistency within the field of parental involvement. For these reasons, I will use Epstein's framework as the basis for my own investigation. There are, however, several drawbacks associated with this classification system. Firstly, a number of researchers have pointed out that Epstein's typology is based on the ways in which parents *might* engage with schools, rather than on empirical evidence relating to their real-life behaviours (Desforge and Abouchaar, 2003; Kavanagh, 2013). Secondly, some of the parental practices suggested by Epstein will be more common than others, with the nature and extent of involvement varying from one context to another (Lopez et al., 2001). This means that Epstein's typology – which presents each type of involvement on an equal footing – could give a distorted picture. If the less common types of involvement were associated with certain groups of parents, then Epstein's typology would thus over-emphasise their involvement relative to others. I would add that this problem becomes

exacerbated if the practices listed by Epstein's are judged normatively – that is to say, seen as things that should rather than could be done. Additionally, Epstein's typology is concerned only with how parents can assist the work of schools and does not consider other ways in which they can be involved in the education of their child (Howley, Bickel and McDonough, 1997; Kohl and McMahon, 2000). This has led some researchers to label forms of involvement not included within Epstein's typology as 'parental engagement' (Barton, et al., 2004; Harris and Goodall, 2007). This term has not, however, been defined consistently within the literature. To avoid confusion, I will therefore use 'parental involvement' to describe all school-related parental actions, whether or not these fall within Epstein's typology.

In addition to the problems outlined in the preceding paragraph, I would argue that there are several additional aspects of Epstein's typology which should be considered by researchers who take it as the starting point for their work.

Firstly, Epstein's classification system is based on the assumption that parental involvement has a beneficial effect on students' learning. Whilst there is much research evidence to support this view (e.g. Sheldon and Epstein, 2005; Symeou, 2006; Jeynes, 2007), the extent of these benefits has been challenged by others (Robinson and Harris, 2014). Epstein's typology has also been used as a platform for the promotion of partnership between families and schools (e.g. Henderson and Mapp, 2002). Some researchers, however, have suggested that this may not necessarily be the best approach and that parents and teachers could achieve their aims more efficiently if they assumed separate responsibilities (Lareau, 1989; Reay, 2005). Indeed, parental

involvement could serve as a mechanism through which certain groups of parents derive greater benefits than others (Weininger and Lareau, 2003; Symeou, 2003). Additionally, Epstein's typology is not the only classification system available to researchers. Edwards and Alldred (2000), for example, have classified involvement in terms of whether students facilitate, comply with or resist their parents' involvement. Auerbach (2007) has described a typology that seems particularly relevant to my research question relating to parent-teacher relationships (section 1.3). She suggested that parents could be placed along a continuum, moving from those who respected the authority of teachers, to those who questioned school policy or challenged classroom practice. Given these alternative perspectives, it could be argued that the popularity of Epstein's typology – which reflects its practical utility and the need for common terms of reference – carries with it the danger of restricting the thinking of researchers if they look no further.

2.2 Parental involvement

2.2.1 The Wider Context

Having considered how parental involvement can be classified, I would now like to provide an overview of the field as a whole. Parental involvement has been an active area of international research for more than three decades (Ferguson, 2008; Jeynes, 2010) and has generated a large number of publications. There appear to be three major strands of research relating to parental involvement. One of these focuses on looking for links between

existing levels of involvement and educational outcomes such as behaviour, attendance and achievement in external examinations. These correlational studies are typically based on large-scale data sets and use statistical techniques to disentangle the variables of interest (e.g. Catsambis, 2001). The second strand focuses on the implementation or evaluation of interventions aimed at enhancing involvement. These studies range from action research projects conducted within a single school (e.g. Hlavaty, 2015) to evaluations of nationwide government initiatives (e.g. Harris and Goodall, 2007) and are typically based on mixed methods. The third strand explores the behaviours and expectations of parents, teachers and students, their relationships, and how they perceive their respective roles. Such studies are typically small-scale and qualitative, generating data of a more personal nature based on the observed actions or interview responses of individual participants (e.g. Wanat, 2010). Since my thesis is concerned with the aims of parents and teachers when they meet and the relationships between them, this latter strand relates most closely to my thesis. I will therefore focus my attention on these studies, though I will also draw on research from the other two strands where these seem relevant. Before going on to review the studies themselves, I will first of all outline the theoretical frameworks which have been most widely used.

2.2.2 Theoretical Foundations

Much of the published research relating to parental involvement has been based on one of two approaches, these being Epstein's theory of overlapping spheres (Epstein, 1987; 1992) and Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's parental

involvement model (Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler, 1995; 1997). I will now review these theoretical frameworks in detail, before going on to consider alternative models.

Overlapping spheres of influence

Epstein's theory of overlapping spheres (Epstein, 1987; 1992), emphasises the family, school and community – represented as three overlapping spheres – as important interacting systems affecting a child's development. These major systems can move closer together or further apart, the extent of overlap being influenced by a range of factors relating to those involved. Epstein's model assumes that some aspects of children's development are conducted in isolation by schools, families or communities whilst others are performed jointly (Epstein et al., 2002). This is relevant to my thesis since she also considers the mechanisms – such as parent-teacher meetings – through which joint action can occur. Central to Epstein's theory is the notion that, within the overlapping regions between spheres, the developmental needs of children are best met when the individuals concerned support one another and engage in cooperative action in order to achieve their mutual interests (Epstein, 2001). A further idea is that the achievement of these common goals can be facilitated by the actions of schools (Epstein et al., 2002). Epstein's theory does not, however, take into account the more subtle features of parental involvement such as parenting style (Jeynes, 2011), or acknowledge situations where parents choose inaction as a deliberate strategy to encourage self-reliance (Schnee and Bose, 2010). Indeed, Jeynes (2011, p.9)

has suggested that involvement is ‘considerably broader and more complicated than early parental involvement theories have acknowledged’. Other researchers have suggested that Epstein’s notion of cooperative action between families and schools is an unrealistic aim (Hornby, 2011), or that this could place unwanted pressure on parents to become involved (McNamara et al., 2000). I will return to the first of these points in the following section and discuss how my findings relate to Epstein’s model in section 5.2.1.

Developing Epstein’s theory

Barton et al. (2004) have extended Epstein’s theory by considering the potential for parents to ‘author’ their participation with schools. They described an equal home-school relationship in which parental involvement is jointly controlled by both parents and teachers. They also considered the parent (or teacher) as an individual who views the school (or family) through the lens of their wider social and cultural environment. In conversations between home and school, each parent or teacher would therefore bring with them a personal history that could influence the way in which they interact. Barton et al. suggested that the life experiences and cultural perspectives of parents from a variety of backgrounds could thus provide new ways of looking at existing school practice and create the potential for new approaches. The implication for teachers is that, when talking to parents, they should act in the role of learners as well as experts by seeking and responding to information about the wider contexts of families. They did not, however, suggest how schools might bring this about in practice. Moreover, some researchers have noted

that teachers are not predisposed towards listening to parents (MacLure and Walker, 2000; Matthiesen, 2015) – a point I will discuss further in section 5.2.3 – suggesting that the ‘learning dialogue’ described by Barton et al. could be more of an aspiration than a reality.

Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler’s model

Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler treated parental involvement as a process which occurs on various levels, the final aim being students’ academic success (Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler, 1995; 1997; Hoover-Dempsey, et al., 2005). The first level is concerned with the reasons why parents become involved in their child’s learning: they must see it as their role to become involved, believe that their role is helpful and be exposed to opportunities, invitations or requests from either their child or the school. The second level is about the forms that this involvement takes. These are influenced by the skills and knowledge that parents possess, the demands placed on them from other areas of their life, and the nature of the involvement requested. The next level considers the mechanisms through which involvement is brought about and how these are perceived by students, most notably the modelling of desirable attitudes, behaviours and skills, providing direct instruction, and encouraging learning through various rewards. The final level focuses on student attributes which favour achievement, including self-belief, motivation, knowledge and skills. Whilst Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler’s model acknowledges a range of sociological variables relating to schools, families and communities, the primary focus is on the psychological factors operating at the level of

individual parents and their children. Their model thus usefully complements Epstein's theory since it explains why parents may (or may not) become involved and suggests actual mechanisms through which they can influence educational outcomes. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler do not, however, distinguish between home-based and school-based parental involvement. Also, the relative importance of the mechanisms through which involvement can occur may be context-dependent (Deslandes and Bertrand, 2005; Green et al., 2007), meaning that some aspects of their framework may not be relevant in certain settings. Perhaps more importantly, they appear to consider involvement only from the perspective of parents and students, and do not consider the personal attributes and actions of teachers. This is significant since, where involvement does not occur, parents and students – as opposed to teachers or schools – are likely to be identified as the cause.

Alternative models

The 'partnership' models proposed by Epstein (2010) and Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2005) have been widely adopted within the involvement literature (e.g. Shumow, Lyutykh and Schmidt, 2011; Bennett-Conroy, 2012). There are, however, other perspectives from which parental behaviours can be viewed. Before I go on to review the empirical literature relating to parental involvement, I will therefore consider two other theoretical approaches which have been used to account for the way in which parents interact with teachers and schools.

In the model described by Hornby (2011), parents and teachers adopt separate 'expert' and 'layperson' roles. Teachers act as specialists and providers of information or advice, whilst parents provide indirect assistance and are not expected to make decisions relating to academic learning. According to this approach, parents lack the necessary knowledge and skills to effectively direct their children's education and play a less important role. Evidence to support this model has been provided by several researchers within the wider parental involvement literature (Katyal and Evers, 2007; Dobbins and Abbot, 2010; Zaoura and Aubrey, 2010) – see section 2.2.3 – as well as studies based on the direct observation of parent teacher meetings (Symeou, 2003; Cheatham and Ostrosky, 2011 and 2013; Inglis, 2012) – see section 2.3.4. Such a demarcation of roles could, however, be viewed in positive or negative terms. On the one hand, Symeou (2003, p.21) has concluded that parents were 'subordinate or kept in subjection by teachers' expertise and professional knowledge'. Seen in this light, the positioning of parents as supporters or assistants could be viewed as a means to protect the professional status of teachers and would not necessarily be welcomed by parents. On the other hand, Katyal and Evers (2007, p.67) have reported that parents did not wish to engage with teachers as equals and that both parents and teachers 'shied away from initiating any form of communication that was unscheduled'. These findings suggest a more cooperative relationship between parents and teachers, with both parties willingly adopting separate roles in order to secure the best educational outcomes. These differing perspectives are relevant to my research question regarding the relationships

between parents and teachers. I will discuss how the findings from my study support or challenge these points of view in section 5.2.4.

A number of researchers have considered a model for parent-teacher interaction based on the notion of free-market principles within education. McNamara et al. (2000), for example, have started from the notion that teachers are producers, parents are consumers, and educated students are the products. They found that 'market imperatives' (ibid., p.475) had shifted power and responsibility from schools to families, with parents being increasingly viewed by schools as business partners in the education of their children. According to their findings, however, such developments lead to friction between family members, as well as feelings of inadequacy or guilt where parents felt unable to meet the school's expectations. Addi-Racah and Arviv-Elyashiv (2008) have also viewed the positioning of parents as consumers within education as problematic. They found that trends towards decentralisation and the establishment of free-market ideology had given parents greater control over both school policy and classroom practice. They concluded that these changes had caused tensions within parent-teacher relationships, thus creating the potential for conflict – a theme I will return to in section 2.2.5. Along similar lines, Inglis (2012, p.83) has pointed out that the trend towards a 'consumerist ideology' has shifted the balance of power from professionals towards parents. She found that this had made parents more likely to advocate on behalf of their child and that teachers viewed this as a challenge to their professional status. Moreover, she argued that such changes had divided parents according to their willingness or ability to

promote their children's interests. It would thus appear that the introduction of free market principles within education has created the potential for new roles for families and schools, though these may not necessarily foster the cooperative relationships envisaged by Epstein (2010) or Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2005). This has implications regarding the nature of parent-teacher relationships which I will discuss in section 5.2.2.

2.2.3 Partnership

In the preceding section, I noted that 'partnership' models of involvement have provided the theoretical starting point for much parental involvement research. I will now present an overview of this research, my aim being to place those most relevant to my thesis within their wider research context. I will begin with the research evidence in support of partnership between families and schools, before going on to consider those studies which challenge this point of view.

Promoting partnership

There is a large body of evidence to indicate that both parents and teachers see parental involvement as a good thing (Drummond and Stipek, 2004; Miretzski, 2004; Peters et al., 2008; Grant, 2011). Moreover, various researchers appear to have started from the assumption that involvement is beneficial (Feiler et al., 2006; Hawes, 2008; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005) or have promoted the notion of parents, students and teachers as partners with equal responsibility for learning (Henderson and Mapp, 2002; Miretzsky, 2004;

Cox, 2005; Reilly, 2008; Weiss et al., 2009; Wanat, 2010). Within the U.S., for example, Weiss et al. (2009, p.4) state that families and schools 'must together construct family involvement, actively taking part and sharing responsibility in building mutually respectful relationships and partnerships'. From a U.K. perspective, a similar picture emerges. For example, Harris and Goodall (2007) have recommended that schools should make efforts to understand their local community, noting that some parents will only become engaged if the home-school relationship is perceived to be genuinely two-way. Similarly, Warin (2009) has emphasised the need for families and education professionals to engage in meaningful, two-way dialogue in which parental expertise is recognised and valued. Further support comes from the teaching profession itself (Day, 2006; Cohen, 2008). For example, Cohen (2008) has investigated the ways in which the teachers in her study constructed professional identities for themselves when talking about their work, noting that they presented themselves as collaborators rather than individuals working in isolation. Numerous articles can also be found within the professional literature which offer advice to practitioners on improving communication and collaboration between home and school (e.g. Hawes, 2008; Mitchel, Foulger and Wetzel, 2009). It would thus appear that the prevailing view amongst many researchers and professionals is that partnership involving equally-shared responsibility between parents and teachers should be taken as the ideal.

Partnership in practice

Whilst the notion of partnership has been widely promoted within the parental involvement literature, some researchers have presented evidence to suggest that such relationships do not occur in reality (Hughes and Greenhough, 2006; Shumow, Lyutykh and Schmidt, 2011; Hornby and Lafaele, 2011; Sormunen, Tossavainen and Turunen 2011; Lemmer, 2012) or that those involved play very different – and not necessarily cooperative – roles in the education process (McNamara et al., 2000; Katyal and Evers, 2007; Zaoura and Aubrey, 2010). Hornby and Lafaele (2011, p.38), for example, have pointed to ‘clear gaps between the rhetoric on [parental involvement] found in the literature and typical [parental involvement] practices found in schools’. Similarly, Lemmer (2012, p.93) has concluded that ‘schools appear to have some way to go to realise the potential of the parent-school conference as an optimal opportunity to work with parents as partners’. Others have gone further by suggesting that partnership between parents and teachers may be an unrealistic aim (Katyal and Evers, 2007; Inglis, 2012). Katyal and Evers (2007, p.74), for instance, have suggested that increased informal communication between parents and teachers may be a ‘less grand but more relevant’ goal for schools. It would seem, therefore, that the notion of equal partnership between families and schools is not necessarily reflected in practice, and that some researchers consider such relationships to be an unlikely prospect. This has led to explanations for the absence of partnership in terms of ‘barriers’ to involvement – an approach which suggests that closer relationships between parents and teachers could occur were these obstacles to be removed.

2.2.4 Barriers to Parental Involvement

I will now consider the research which relates to the reasons why parents do not become involved in their children's education. This has been an active area of parental involvement research in recent years and a comprehensive review of all the literature would go beyond the scope of my thesis. For a more complete treatment of the barriers to parental involvement, see Desforges and Abouchaar (2003) or Hornby and Lafaele (2011).

Parent-related factors

Many studies have investigated how the characteristics of parents – age, gender, social class, level of education – affect levels of parental involvement (McNeal, 2001; Gillies, 2005; Feiler et al., 2006; Raty, Kasanen and Laine, 2009; Bodovski, 2010; Stalker et al., 2011). Raty, Kasanen and Laine (2009), for example, used survey data to determine how academically and vocationally educated parents became involved in different ways. They found that academically educated mothers were the parents most likely to attend parent-teacher meetings, help their child to prepare for tests or opt for a non-local school. By contrast, fathers with vocational educations were most likely to report negative experiences of meetings with teachers. It would thus appear that parents within different demographic categories may become involved to a greater or lesser extent than others, or become involved in different ways. According to Warin (2009), however, such approaches are problematic since parents or families – as opposed to schools – could be perceived to be the

cause where involvement does not occur. Moreover, Feiler et al. (2006, p.464) have questioned the validity of classifying families, noting that 'there may be no common parental viewpoint'. They concluded that each family should be treated as an individual case and not categorised according to general factors such as social class or ethnicity.

Of the various parental attributes that might act as barriers to involvement, most attention has been paid to factors relating to social class. Studies in this area typically focus on differences between working-class parents on the one hand and schools or teachers on the other (Lareau, 1987; Hanafin and Lynch, 2002; Drummond and Stipek, 2004; Benoit, 2008; Wanat, 2010). Lareau (1987, p.73), for example, has suggested that 'social class provides parents with unequal resources', thus limiting the ability of some individuals to become involved with schools. Similarly, Hanafin and Lynch (2002, p. 35) found that, whilst the working-class parents in their study were 'interested, informed and concerned' for their children's education, they also felt nervous or uncomfortable when meeting their children's teachers. Further support comes from Wanat (2010), who concluded that parents whose life experiences and social background were different from teachers felt discouraged from becoming involved and did not build collaborative relationships. It could be argued that these studies are limited to their local contexts and so may not reflect more general attitudes or patterns of behaviour – a point that I will return to in section 7.1. Moreover, it would appear that different researchers have defined 'middle-class' and 'working-class' in different ways. Taken together, however, a consistent picture emerges – working-class families do

not appear to consider themselves on equal terms with teachers and tend to adopt a supporting role. These findings support the 'expert' model of parent-teacher interaction outlined in section 2.2.2.

Student-related factors

Various researchers have explored the way in which the attitudes and behaviour of students might influence parental involvement (Edwards and Alldred, 2000; Deslandes and Bertrand, 2006; Shumow, Lyutykh and Schmidt, 2011). For example, Deslandes and Bertrand (2006) found that parents were more motivated when they felt that their children wanted or expected them to become involved. Similarly, Shumow, Lyutykh and Schmidt (2011) reported increased parental involvement when students showed interest in a school subject, though they do not make clear whether this was a cause or an effect. Other researchers have considered how the demographic characteristics of students can influence involvement. Edwards and Alldred (2000), for instance, suggested that the way in which students responded to initiatives aimed at increasing parental involvement varied according to the gender, ethnicity and social class of the child. They found that girls were more likely than boys to actively promote involvement, whilst white, middle-class children were more passive and compliant compared to their working-class or ethnic-minority counterparts. Along similar lines, several researchers have concluded that the age of the child is significant since levels of involvement drop markedly as students move through the education system (Catsambis, 2001; Hu et al, 2009; Ferrara, 2009) – though I would argue that this could have been caused

by differences in educational practice between primary and secondary schools. These studies suggest that student-related factors can have a significant effect on the extent and nature of parental involvement. I will discuss how the presence of students influenced the conversations which took place in my study in section 5.1.1.

Material resources

Several researchers have described how material resources could account for differences in levels of parental involvement, notably lack of time due to work commitments (e.g. Ferrara, 2009; Sormunen, 2011; Semke and Sheriden, 2012) and child care issues (Peters et al, 2008). Such barriers to involvement have been found to be particularly difficult to overcome for parents from poor or working-class backgrounds (Kyle, 2011), single parents (Kohl and McMahon, 2000) or for parents who have disabilities (Stalker et al., 2011). Kohl and McMahon (2000), for example, found that single-parent status affected the type of involvement which occurred, the quality of parent-teacher relationships, and how highly teachers felt parents valued education. Single parents, however, reported being just as involved as two-parent families with their children at home, thus complementing Hanafin and Lynch (2002) who noted that working-class parents placed a high value on education. Some researchers have also raised concerns about the 'digital divide' between those who have the skills and resources to take advantage of new communication technology and those who do not (Peters et al, 2008; Lewin and Luckin, 2009; Ferrara, 2011). For instance, Lewin and Luckin (2009) evaluated how

technology could be used to improve parental involvement in areas of social deprivation. They found that a perceived lack of skills and confidence on the part of parents acted to deter involvement. It would thus appear that the degree to which parents are able to become involved is limited by the demands of work and family life, and that their ability to cope with these pressures relates to their occupational status and family structure. I will return to these ideas in sections 5.2.2 and 5.2.4 when I discuss the relationships between the parents and teachers in my study.

Perceived roles and self-efficacy

A number of researchers have investigated parental involvement in terms of role construction or perceived self-efficacy. Such studies, which are based on Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's model (section 2.2.2), assume that parents will only become involved if they consider this to be their responsibility and believe that they can achieve their aims. Schnee and Bose (2010), for example, found that many parents from low-income, minority backgrounds chose not to become involved in their child's learning because they had little confidence in their ability or were unfamiliar with new teaching methods. These findings are supported by Stalker et al. (2011) who have explained that parents with learning disabilities were far less likely to become involved since they lacked self-belief. Conversely, Juntilla, Vauras and Laakkonen (2007) have shown that perceptions regarding effectiveness can also motivate parents to become involved. They found that parents were more likely to provide at-home support if they believed that their involvement could make an

effective difference. Other studies have reported low levels of parental involvement where parents considered it predominantly the role of the school or teacher to educate their child (Montgomery, 2005; Katyal and Evers, 2007; Dobbins and Abbot, 2010). For example, Dobbins and Abbott (2010) noted that the parents in their study saw themselves in a supporting or cooperating role rather than working with teachers as equal partners, thus providing support for the 'expert' model of parent-teacher relationships described by Hornby (2011) – see section 2.2.2. Additionally, there is some evidence to indicate a shift in perceived roles over time, with more U.K. parents seeing themselves as responsible for their child's education in 2007 than they were in 2001 (Peters et al., 2008). This is relevant to my research since it raises the possibility that parent-teacher relationships are moving towards more equal partnership between parents and teachers.

Mistrust and misunderstandings

Some studies have suggested that a lack of understanding between parents, students and teachers may serve to deter involvement. Ferguson (2008, p.23), for example, has reported that differing expectations regarding the extent and nature of parental involvement can lead to mistrust, and highlighted the need to 'reveal and confront misconceptions that blind both school staff and families'. Baker, Denessen and Brus-Laven (2007) have also described barriers relating to mistrust, concluding that these can only be overcome by exploring differences and finding common ground through face-to-face interaction. Westergard and Galloway (2010), however, found that contact

which was initiated by parents often resulted in negative exchanges and did not improve parent-teacher relationships. They suggested that this was because teachers felt that their professional competence was being threatened, thus diminishing their control and increasing their sense of vulnerability. By contrast, Ranson, Martin and Vincent (2004) have provided an alternative perspective on misunderstandings between parents and schools. They conducted research into incidents of parental 'storming' – angry encounters between aggrieved parents and school staff – and found that such incidents typically involved two stages: a 'pre-civil' phase in which parents use vehement language to express their anger and demand immediate action from the school, followed by a 'civil' phase in which they engaged in communicative action and were willing to negotiate. They concluded that these parents were not naturally hostile towards the school and that, once their initial emotional reaction had subsided, they were actually seeking to understand the problem and achieve resolution. I will return to the issue of mistrust between parents and teachers when I discuss parent-teacher relationships in section 5.2.1.

2.2.5 Intrinsic Conflict

In the last section, I considered those studies which have explained the discrepancy between parental involvement theory and practice in terms of external 'barriers' to involvement. I will now consider the literature which suggests that the nature of the parent-teacher relationship itself precludes the possibility of partnership based on equality and common goals (Lareau, 1987; McNamara et al., 2000; Attanucci, 2004; Addi-Raccah and Arviv-Elyashiv,

2008). This view – less prevalent within the literature – is distinct from the idea of removable ‘barriers’ and suggests that involvement based on equal partnership between parents and teachers may be an unrealistic goal.

I will begin with Lareau (1987, p.82), who has pointed out that parents seek to promote the interests of their own child, whereas teachers strive to support the development of all the students they teach. Indeed, she noted the possibility that parents and teachers were ‘natural enemies’, constantly having to negotiate the boundaries between their respective territories. Similarly, McNamara et al. (2000, p.475) have highlighted the ‘dissonance’ between teachers working towards performance targets at the school level and parents seeking to maximise the benefits for their own children. They also noted discrepancies between the normative values promoted by the school and those held by parents. Attanucci (2004, p.67) has also viewed parent-teacher relationships as problematic. She pointed out that the roles of parents and teachers carry with them distinctly different social expectations, and that relationships between parents and teachers could ‘easily degenerate into finger-pointing and derision’. Such thinking is also reflected in the military terminology used by researchers when describing the relationships between parents/families and teachers/schools. Baek (2010, p.324), for example, has referred to the school arena as ‘a battlefield for power fights between different actors’, whilst Ferrara (2009, p.124) has raised the possibility that schools are becoming more like ‘fortresses’. Taken together, these studies suggest that parents and teachers have fundamentally different values and expectations, and that tensions are unavoidable as both parties seek to achieve their

separate aims. Such thinking questions the 'partnership' models of Epstein (2010) and Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2005) in which parents and teachers share responsibility and work towards common goals – see section 2.2.2. The notion of parents and teachers as opponents is, however, compatible with 'expert' and 'consumer' models of parent-teacher interaction in which both parties play different roles and where power differences are recognised. I will discuss the evidence generated by my study for and against the notion of parent-teacher conflict in section 5.2.3.

2.2.6 Theoretical Limitations

In contrast to the studies outlined in the previous two sections, several researchers have accounted for the apparent absence of parental involvement in terms of the way in which it has been defined (McNamara et al., 2000; Ferrara, 2009; Schnee and Bose, 2010; Wanat, 2010; Jeynes, 2011). For example, McNamara et al. (2000) have found that some parents stepped back as their children moved through the education system in order to develop their child's autonomy, claiming that they would not become independent unless they were trusted to take responsibility for their learning. This notion is supported by Schnee and Bose (2010, p.111), who found many parents deliberately chose not to act in order to encourage self-reliance in their children and that policies designed to get parents more actively involved were felt to be intrusive and frustrating. They called for schools to 'look beyond narrow conceptions of parent engagement' that focus only on school-initiated actions. Wanat (2010) has also questioned the assumption that those parents

who are not involved at school are disengaged or disinterested in their children's education. She found that, even though some parents expressed dissatisfaction with school and did not become involved in school-based involvement, they were still active in their child's learning at home. Finally, Jeynes (2011) has drawn attention to 'subtle' aspects of involvement such as parental expectations, parenting style, and the extent and nature of parent-child communication. He reported that these forms of involvement may have a much more significant effect on educational outcomes than direct actions such as attending school functions or helping with homework. It would thus appear that the concept of parental involvement may be wider than has been previously recognised and that a lack of direct involvement with schools or teachers does not necessarily indicate that parents are inactive or indifferent to the educational progress of their children. This is significant since restricted understandings of parental behaviour might have caused certain forms of involvement to have been overlooked, meaning that some groups of parents could have been labelled as disengaged (Wood and Warin, 2014). I will return to the limitations of current theories in section 6.2 when I make recommendations for future research.

2.3 Parent-teacher Meetings

I will now shift my attention from the broader field of parental involvement research towards those studies which have focused on the direct observation of face-to-face meetings between parents and teachers. Since these are directly relevant to my research questions, I will consider them in greater detail

than the literature reviewed in the previous section. I have divided the studies into five broad categories according to the major themes which have emerged from my review: organisation and power, partnership, opposition, authority and control, and harm avoidance. Within each of these categories, I will select two or three representative examples, and present an outline of the methodology, theoretical framework and key findings. I will then go on to comment on the limitations of each study and consider its relevance to my research questions.

2.3.1 Organisation and Power

There are a number of studies which draw attention to the way in which parent-teacher meetings are organised (Walker, 1998; MacLure and Walker, 2000; Weininger and Lareau, 2003; Lemmer, 2012; Inglis, 2012; 2014; Matthiesen, 2015). I will consider three of these in detail – Walker, 1998; Lemmer, 2012; Matthiesen, 2015 – since they illustrate how the physical or social organisation of meetings can create or reinforce power differences between parents and teachers. These studies thus provide evidence to challenge the notion of equal partnership between parents and teachers – in keeping with those referred to in section 2.2.3 – and are therefore pertinent to my research question regarding parent-teacher relationships.

I will begin with Walker (1998), whose interest in parent-teacher meetings was triggered by anecdotal evidence which suggested that those involved found these occasions to be unsatisfactory. She therefore set out to explore the

nature of these events and identify areas for further research. Taking a case study approach, Walker conducted interviews and made observations during parent-teacher meetings at four secondary schools in the south-east of England. She painted a negative picture and described meetings as difficult and frustrating occasions for all concerned, exacerbated by the practical realities of long queues, time constraints and a lack of privacy (Walker, 1998, pp.166-171). Moreover, she suggested that the organisation of parent-teacher meetings enabled power imbalances between parents and teachers to be established and maintained. Conversations took place on school 'territory', with teachers remaining seated throughout the evening and utilising 'power props' such as mark books or pens. By contrast, parents – often 'struggling with armfuls of coats, gloves, scarves' – had to wait for their turn and introduce themselves before being invited to sit down. Walker also reported that communication tended to be one-way – from teachers to parents – and that the information provided by teachers was not necessarily what parents were seeking. Indeed, she noted that parents and teachers approached these meetings with differing agendas and that parents often felt that their own knowledge or experience was undervalued or ignored. Her findings are thus in keeping with the 'expert' model of parent-teacher interaction (Hornby, 2011) outlined in section 2.2.2. Additionally, she noted that the identities of those involved were threatened, with personal credibility at risk and parental or professional practice often criticised. Her study thus raises challenges for those researchers who have promoted equal partnership between home and school – in keeping with the studies I referred to in section 2.2.3 – and

provides support for the notion of intrinsic conflict between parents and teachers (section 2.2.5).

Walker's investigation is significant since it identifies parent-teacher meetings as the only opportunity for most parents to engage in face-to-face conversation with their children's teachers – in keeping with the rationale I presented in section 1.2. Her research also draws attention to the problematic nature of these events and provides evidence to question the 'partnership' models I described in section 2.2.2. Walker's study thus relates directly to my research question regarding parent-teacher relationships. Additionally, Walker's investigation paved the way for more substantial research into the nature of parent-teacher meetings (MacLure and Walker, 2000), in which the themes she identified were pursued further – I will provide a detailed critique of this study in section 2.3.3. Walker herself, however, highlighted several limitations with regard to her investigation. Firstly, she pointed out that her study was small-scale, being based within four secondary schools in the same part of the country. She also noted that her study did not address issues relating to cultural or social differences between the participants. Additionally, Walker acknowledged a bias in the selection of interview participants towards individuals who were articulate and willing to be involved – a problem that has been highlighted elsewhere (Tooley, 1997). I would add that the wide-ranging nature of her study meant that she was only able to discuss her findings at a relatively superficial level. A study which focused on fewer themes in greater detail might have generated more interesting findings. Moreover, she made no

explicit recommendations for further research, a surprising omission given that this was the principle aim of her study.

Walker's findings with regard to the organisation of parent-teacher meetings and the feelings of those involved have been supported by Lemmer (2012), who conducted her research within a diverse range of South African schools. She found that parent-teacher meetings were 'ritualised school events in all types of schools', with their length and format being closely managed by schools, and that 'parents and teachers' expectations of conferences are limited' (ibid., p.83). Echoing the findings of Walker (1998), she also noted that the physical arrangement of meetings, time limits and difficulties with organisation trivialised meetings, restricted dialogue and emphasised power differences between parents and teachers. She also observed that the focus of these meetings, the student, was almost always 'conspicuously absent' (ibid., p.93), again in close agreement with Walker (1998). Lemmer found that the parents in her study regarded attendance at parent-teacher conferences as their duty. Whilst they typically had only modest expectations, they expressed frustration when trying to get teachers to listen and often found it difficult to raise the topics that they found relevant. Teachers also had limited expectations, and were wary of 'difficult' parents. They also considered these events to be ineffective, tiring and stressful, and did not adopt a learning role in which they valued the cultural knowledge, experience and skills of parents. Lemmer concluded that, whilst parent-teacher meetings offered an excellent opportunity to bring families and schools together to focus on the development

of the child, there was little opportunity for 'true dialogue' (ibid., p.93) and that teachers tended to treat parents as clients rather than genuine partners.

Lemmer's paper provides support for Walker's findings in terms of the similarity of meetings across different settings, their unproductive nature, the control of talk by teachers, the lack of genuine dialogue, and the frustrations experienced by participants. Moreover, the two studies were conducted some fourteen years apart, in different education systems, and utilised different conceptual frameworks. It could thus be argued that the findings reported in these studies are independent of both context and the researcher's theoretical orientation. As for Walker's study, however, Lemmer based her findings on a restricted group of participants – teachers with more than ten years' experience and parents who had attended parent-teacher meetings for at least the last four years. Indeed, her sample included only one father and two students, and so might not accurately represent the views of all those involved. Also, Lemmer's findings were based solely on interview responses – with no direct observation or recordings. As I have already noted in section 1.2, interview comments should be interpreted cautiously since participants may be reluctant to reveal their intentions, opinions or feelings where this might cast them in an unfavourable light (Cameron, 2001) – I will discuss this point further in section 3.4.3. Additionally, Lemmer pointed out that her professional reputation and position as an educationalist helped to facilitate the recruitment of participants. This has implications with regard to sampling, and reliability, and is particularly pertinent to my thesis since I was familiar to the participants in my study as a practising teacher. I will describe the

strategies I used to reduce the effects of this problem in sections 3.6.2 of my methodology.

As for the studies already reviewed in this section, Matthiesen (2015) has reported how the organisational aspects of parent-teacher meetings reinforce power differences between parents and teachers. She conducted an explorative case study involving Somali diaspora families in two Danish primary schools, though her justification for this – they were considered to be a vulnerable group who were often not able to live up to school expectations of parental responsibility – suggests that she might not have been as open-minded as she claimed. Matthiesen adopted an ethnographic approach to data collection and utilised data from a variety of sources, collected over an extended period of time, which included participant observation, interviews with parents, teachers and principals, as well as audio recordings of parent-teacher meetings. She interpreted her data in terms of positioning theory (Davies and Harré, 1991), whereby people actively construct – either through their talk or practice – versions of themselves in relation to one another. According to this theory, these positions are not fixed, but are continually being negotiated and re-negotiated through social interaction from one moment to the next. They are also connected with power and confer certain rights on individuals, thus creating possibilities for action. However, the positions constructed by individuals are also restrictive – only certain ways of speaking or doing are considered acceptable, thus limiting the range of actions available. Moreover, in any given situation there will be only a certain

number of positions that a person can adopt, these being dependent on political, historical and social factors.

Matthiesen found that teachers were faced with a dilemma: whilst they said that they wished to engage in dialogue on an equal footing, recognising and valuing the knowledge held by parents, they also wanted to preserve their professional authority and retain the right to decide on the correct course of action in educational matters. She suggested that teachers utilise school practices and procedures to position themselves as experts during meetings:

the teacher informs the parents of how the child is performing both socially and academically and at times informs (if not to say “educates”) parents on what they are to do outside of the school

Matthiesen, 2015, p.15

It would thus appear that Matthiesen did not consider the parents and teachers in her study to be equal partners, and that the relationships between them more closely resembles the ‘expert’ model of parent-teacher interaction I described in section 2.2.2. She also noted that parents were subject to ‘institutional and interactional processes in the parent–teacher conference that systematically silence their voices’ (Matthiesen, 2015, p.1), despite having much that they wished to say. In keeping with the findings of Walker (1998) and Lemmer (2012), she noted that this was brought about through the structure of meetings – their physical layout and turn-taking procedures – as

well as material artefacts such as students' books. Additionally, Matthiesen pointed out that some parents chose not to speak up through a wish to avoid antagonising the teacher and causing adverse consequences for their child. This is a point I will return to when I discuss the tendency for the parents and teachers in my study to avoid conflict – see section 5.1.2. Matthiesen concluded by challenging the notion that some parents remain silent because they come from a culture where the authority of the teacher is not questioned. She argued that parents and teachers should be viewed as agents in control of their actions, able to create positions for themselves and for one another during the course of their meetings. She also pointed out that a perspective from which parents were seen as bound by wider cultural forces would place the problem beyond the reach of individuals, meaning that teachers might not appreciate that they could generate meaningful dialogue through their actions.

In terms of methodology, Matthiesen's study is unusual in that she adopted an ethnographic approach, immersing herself in the daily life of the school and observing the families involved for a considerable time. Her study design was thus of particular interest to me owing to my position as a practising teacher at the school in which my study took place – an issue I will return to in sections 3.6.2 and 7.1. Matthiesen's approach, in which she combined interview data with direct observation, also illustrates that the responses of participants to the researcher's questions do not necessarily reflect their actions during face-to-face meetings. This supports the point I made previously with regard to the reliability of studies based exclusively on interview evidence – I will consider this idea in relation to my own study design in section 3.4. Regarding the

organisation of parent-teacher meetings, Matthiesen's findings are in close agreement with those of Walker (1998) and Lemmer (2012). Her study also showed how parents sometimes chose to avoid conflict by remaining silent on matters where they disagreed with the teacher and how teachers worked to control conversations, points I will discuss further in sections 5.1.2 and 5.2.4 respectively. With regard to the limitations of Matthiesen's study, her findings were based on just four families, meaning that the behaviour she reported might not be generally applicable. Indeed, she focused on a very specific parent group whose circumstances could be considered unusual. I will return to this point – and provide a response – when I discuss the limitations of my own study in section 7.1. Perhaps more importantly, Matthiesen did not record any conversations involving native Danish families during her study, thus weakening her argument that cultural factors were not the cause of parental silence. Her claim would have been more convincing had she been able to show that the mechanisms she reported were also operating during parent-teacher meetings involving Danish parents. Since she did not, it could be argued that such behaviour might not have occurred with parents from non-Somali cultural backgrounds.

2.3.2 Partnership

In section 2.2.3, I noted that, whilst partnership based on shared responsibility and dialogue was a widely-promoted model for parent-teacher interaction, some researchers have pointed out that such relationships tend not to occur in practice. In this part of my review, I will consider those studies based on the

observation of actual parent-teacher meetings which provide evidence for partnership between parents and teachers (Pillet-Shore, 2004; Markstrom, 2009). I will consider first of all Pillet-Shore (2004), who has applied the techniques of conversation analysis (section 3.5) to recordings of primary school parent-teacher meetings in U.S. primary school settings over a two year period. Pillet-Shore focused on how the parents and teachers in her study constructed their identities during 'arrival' sequences at the start of meetings. She described a practice in which parents stated 'what I had to do or go through to get here' (ibid., p.2), usually framed as a complaint. Pillet-Shore suggested that parents were emphasising these difficulties in order to establish their parental worth, and also to establish the high value they placed on speaking to the teacher. She also reported a corresponding host practice in which teachers described 'what you're coming into' (ibid., p.14), again framed as a grievance but this time describing some unwelcome feature of the meeting place which was beyond their control. Pillet-Shore proposed that this practice was used to show that the teacher was aware of but not able to remedy the problem, thus forestalling any criticism from the parent and establishing a common cause for complaint. She concluded that both practices allowed parents and teachers to 'affiliate and align with each other' (ibid., p.16) by placing the focus on external difficulties.

Pillet-Shore's study provides an instructive example of how conversation analysis can give very detailed, micro-level insights into the complex workings of parent-teacher meetings. She also firmly supported her findings with a large body of evidence – forty-one conversations recorded over a three year period

in four different U.S. school districts. Moreover, she was careful to avoid inferences that could not be 'hearably' demonstrated through the responses of the participants themselves. For these reasons, Pillet-Shore has been influential in the design of my own study, most notably my decision to use transcripts of direct recordings as my principle data source – see section 3.4.2. In terms of her findings, Pillet-Shore's study relates closely to my research questions regarding the conversational aims of parents and teachers since she focused on the ways in which they collaborated so as to establish their identities or strengthen their relationships. Pillet-Shore's study is also relevant to my research question regarding parent-teacher relationships as it provides evidence based on direct observation to show that collaboration – working with another person in order to achieve some common goal – does occur between parents and teachers when they meet. Her findings thus challenge the notion that parental involvement based on common goals does not occur in reality (section 2.2.3), a point I will consider further in section 5.2.1. With regard to the limitations of Pillet-Shore's research, her 'principled', version of conversation analysis (Maynard, 2006, p.58) does not allow her to make predictions based on *a priori* theory, nor does it take into account the wider contexts within which conversations take place (Schegloff, 1997, p.167). It could thus be argued that this approach is restrictive since interpretations based on theoretical considerations or factors beyond the immediate talk taking place are not available to the researcher (Wetherell, 1998). I will return to these points and present my solution to the limitations imposed by conversation analysis in section 3.5 of my methodology.

Markstrom (2009) has also provided evidence to show that parents and teachers collaborate when they meet face-to-face. In keeping with Matthiesen (2015), she adopted an ethnographic approach, collecting data in the form of observations and recordings of parent-teacher meetings in two Swedish pre-schools for a period of one year. However, Markstrom viewed each parent-teacher conversation as an on-going process rather than an isolated event. She therefore observed the actions of parents and teachers in a range of locations leading up to their meetings as well as the conversations themselves. Markstrom adopted a theoretical framework based on the idea of the parent-teacher conversation as 'a pocket of local order' (Ellegard and Vilhelmsson, 2004, p.283), meaning that social activities are governed by the expectations, rules, procedures and power relations of the context within which they occur. This restricts what a person can do in a given place at a particular time, but also gives meaning to their acts and allows for structured social interaction to take place. Parent-teacher meetings – and their associated practices – are thus assumed to be socially constructed phenomena which limit the activities of parents and teachers, but also provide an imperative for action which enables individuals to achieve their goals. Markstrom used this framework as a tool to investigate the set of procedures which constitute parent-teacher conferences, as well as how the actions of those involved were defined and controlled.

Markstrom found that each parent-teacher meeting was part of a process – a series of official and unofficial interactions between individuals. Since these encounters occurred on a daily basis as part of ordinary pre-school life, she

suggested that parent–teacher meetings should be considered as components of an ongoing dialogue rather than isolated events. Markstrom also noted that parents were required to complete a questionnaire with their children at home, and that this was later used to determine the structure and content of parent-teacher meetings. This institutional processes thus caused parents to act at times and in places beyond the school. Perhaps more significantly, she found that parent-teacher meetings were collaborative in nature, with both parties pooling knowledge from home and pre-school for mutual benefit.

... the teacher and the parents have complementary roles in the meeting where they relate to different social contexts, with the parent bringing material from the private sphere and the teacher material from the institutional and public sphere.

Markstrom, 2009, p.128

Markstrom's findings thus call into question the tendency for teachers to disregard parental knowledge and position themselves as the 'expert' in order to control conversations – in keeping with the studies I reviewed in section 2.3.1. Moreover, this behaviour seems consistent with the notion of partnership as promoted within the wider parental involvement literature (section 2.2.3) and raises questions for those researchers who have considered parents and teachers as adversaries (section 2.2.5).

With regard to methodology, Markstrom's findings show how an ethnographic approach – encompassing events leading up to parent-teacher meetings as well as the conversations themselves – can provide useful insights into the complex ways in which these events are constructed. However, Markstrom did not have direct access to the conversations which took place between parents and their children outside of the school. Her wider perspective also meant a less detailed analysis of the parent-teacher conversations themselves. Additionally, Markstrom's study was limited to two pre-school settings, meaning that her findings are not necessarily applicable to other contexts. Markstrom's findings have implications for parent-teacher relationships since they show that both parents and teachers are governed by institutional processes, as opposed to other studies which have focused on the constraints placed on parents (e.g. Walker, 1998; Lemmer, 2012; Matthiesen, 2015). The way in which the participants in Markstrom's study shared their respective knowledge to achieve their aims also has implications regarding the relationships between parents and teachers. Indeed, her study provides the only evidence based on direct observation to show that parents and teachers collaborate in order to achieve educational goals. Perhaps more significantly, she utilised a theoretical framework which allowed for collaboration between parents and teachers whilst recognising differences in power between them. This stands in contrast to approaches based on the notion of the teacher as 'expert' or the parent as 'consumer' (section 2.2.2) within which power differences are viewed as a source of tension or conflict. I will return to Markstrom's study in the light of my own findings when I discuss the nature of

parent-teacher communication (section 5.1.1) and the extent to which partnership between parents and teachers did or did not occur (section 5.2.1).

2.3.3 Opposition

In contrast to the research conducted by Pillet-Shore (2004) and Markstrom (2009), I will now consider two studies which assume the relationship between parents and teachers to be adversarial in nature (MacLure and Walker, 2000; Weininger and Lareau, 2003). I will begin with MacLure and Walker (2000), whose research was based on the study by Walker (1998) which I reviewed in section 2.3.1. As for Walker's earlier research, MacLure and Walker conducted their investigation at secondary schools in the south-east of England, though this time they collected data in the form of audio recordings of parent-teacher conversations as opposed to field notes. MacLure and Walker took studies of paediatric consultations as their theoretical starting point, noting that in these situations, as for parent-teacher meetings, the professional and the parent 'meet over the body' of the child (MacLure and Walker, 2000, p.7). Indeed, they argued that these meetings were fundamentally similar in terms of conversational structure and patterns of interaction. They then utilised a theoretical framework based on the notions of power, knowledge and disciplinary control through surveillance (Foucault, 1977; 1980, cited in MacLure and Walker, 2000, p. 7 and p. 21). Seen from this perspective, the behaviour of certain groups can be controlled by those in authority through a combination of hierarchical observation and normative judgement. This 'establishes over individuals a visibility through which one

differentiates them and judges them' (Foucault, 1977, p. 184, cited in McNicol Jardine, 2005, p.63). Moreover, that which is judged acceptable depends on what is taken as 'normal', with deviations being permitted only within certain limits. MacLure and Walker thus viewed parent-teacher meetings as opportunities for schools to regulate parental behaviour. Parents were subjected to critical scrutiny when they met with teachers, causing them to 'interiorize the disciplinary requirements of the school' (MacLure and Walker, 2000, p.21). In contrast to Foucault, however, they considered this mechanism to work in both directions. Teachers made judgements about parents, but were also subjected to the 'risk of censure' in return (ibid., p.21). MacLure and Walker also highlighted the dual role of parents, who not only regulated their own actions in the light of external scrutiny, but also acted as 'overseers' of their children's behaviour (ibid., p.21).

MacLure and Walker found that most parent-teacher conversations followed a pattern which began with an uninterrupted teacher-led diagnosis, followed by more open dialogue. Indeed, they highlighted the striking 'sameness' of the recorded conversations and suggested that the fixed positions assumed by parents and teachers at these events made differences in social class, gender or ethnicity less important (MacLure and Walker, p.22). They also reported that teachers held most of the power during meetings, typically establishing or maintaining their authority through the use of specialist professional language and ignoring attempts by parents to present their own 'expert' knowledge about the student (ibid., pp.8-10). Additionally, they suggested that both

parents and teachers used these meetings as opportunities to make critical judgements regarding one another's professional or parental worth:

Parents and teachers held one another accountable for students' problems and progress; and the issue of whether or not one could be counted as a 'good' parent or teacher was a spectre that haunted the talk at every turn.

MacLure and Walker, 2000, pp.20-21

This language is revealing since it illustrates how MacLure and Walker viewed the relationship between parents and teachers in terms of personal risk.

Indeed, they painted a picture of tense interaction, set against a backdrop of potential conflict, in which the identities, competence and moral conduct of both parties were held to account. MacLure and Walker concluded by calling into question the value of these encounters and raising the possibility that parent-teacher meetings may have a symbolic rather than practical purpose.

On a personal level, MacLure and Walker's study is important since it sparked my initial interest in conversations between parents and teachers – see section 1.1. Indeed, their methodology and findings have influenced – though not necessarily corresponded with – my thinking at all stages of my thesis.

MacLure and Walker are also the only researchers involved in my literature review to have recorded parent-teacher meetings in English secondary schools. Their investigation thus relates most closely to my own research context. Moreover, they provided insights into the complex interactions that

take place between parents and teachers which are relevant to my research question regarding parent-teacher relationships – see section 1.3.

Additionally, their theoretical framework provides a plausible alternative to the models of parent-teacher interaction outlined in section 2.2.2 and challenges the idea that parental involvement could be enhanced by removing the ‘barriers’ between parents and teachers (see section 2.2.4). MacLure and Walker’s research does, however, carry with it several important limitations, over and above those I have previously noted with regard to Walker’s original study – see section 2.3.1. Since their methodology has been influential with regard to the design of my own investigation, I will consider these in greater detail as follows.

With regard to data analysis, MacLure and Walker used transcripts of parent-teacher conversations as their primary source of data. These were not, however, produced by the researchers themselves, raising the question of how much direct access they had to recordings. Given that only a small proportion of the information captured by an audio recording of a conversation can be included in a transcript (Antaki, 2011), it could be argued that the process of transcription is open to interpretation and that transcripts will vary from one analyst to another. This leaves open the possibility that MacLure and Walker might have been working with distorted or incomplete versions of conversations, a point I will return to when I consider my own approach to transcription in section 3.5. Additionally, their transcripts do not conform to the accepted format used within the field of conversation analysis. They did not, for example, include line numbers to facilitate reference to specific points in a

conversation (Hepburn and Bolden, 2013). Perhaps more importantly, the transcripts presented by MacLure and Walker do not include conversational features such as pauses or overlaps, in contrast to other researchers (e.g. Pillet-Shore, 2004) who have used conversation analysis to analyse their data at the micro-level. MacLure and Walker's transcripts are thus limited in detail, possibly causing them to have missed important aspects of the conversations they recorded.

A second limitation relates to the way in which MacLure and Walker interpreted their findings. Whilst they usefully compared parent-teacher meetings with paediatric consultations in medical settings, there are limits to the comparisons that can be made between the conversations which take place in these differing contexts. According to Robinson (2006), medical consultations typically involve a series of discrete episodes which occur in a predictable order: presentation of a problem, examination of the patient, diagnosis and/or prognosis, and prescription or treatment. With regard to parent-teacher encounters, however, the student has already been assessed by the teacher, making presentation and examination unnecessary during the meeting itself. Additionally, paediatric encounters are likely to revolve around some medical difficulty relating to the child, whose symptoms would be known to the parents beforehand. By contrast, parent-teacher conversations need not be problem-orientated and might involve only 'good news' regarding the student. A parent might also be unaware of any problems relating to their child's schooling until informed by the teacher during a meeting. It could be

argued that a parent would be less likely to be 'surprised' in this way during a medical consultation.

A further limitation relates to the theoretical framework utilised by MacLure and Walker. They viewed parent-teacher meetings in terms of critical inspection and control, thus positioning parents and teachers as adversaries. Indeed, a close analysis of the language used by MacLure and Walker reveals a conflict-orientated text (e.g. blame, censure, jeopardy, risk, scrutiny) in which military terms (e.g. entrenched positions, skirmishes, terms of engagement) are often used. This is in keeping with other researchers within the parental involvement literature – see section 2.2.5. However, such language seems inconsistent with my personal experience of parent-teacher meetings and, as I noted in section 1.2, MacLure and Walker's theoretical approach might have made them more sensitive to conflict and less likely to detect friendly or mutually supportive behaviour. Additionally, their perspective is not the only one from which parent-teacher relationships can be viewed. A wide range of conceptual frameworks have been used by the various researchers reviewed in this chapter and it would seem reasonable to suggest that MacLure and Walker might have arrived at different conclusions had they viewed their data through an alternative theoretical lens.

Weininger and Lareau (2003) have also described parents and teachers in adversarial terms. They examined the way in which parents from differing social backgrounds interacted with teachers during meetings at two contrasting primary schools. This study can be considered as 'critical'

research, since Weininger and Lareau focused on exposing – and thus challenging – the ways in which the parents they labelled as middle-class utilised their cultural background to further the interests of their children, and how this was facilitated by schools. They used a conceptual framework based on the notions of cultural capital and the production or reproduction of power and privilege between different social groups (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990, cited in Weininger and Lareau, 2003, pp. 379-382). According to Weininger and Lareau, schools hold middle-class cultural values and so place expectations on parents and students that cannot be equally well met by individuals from working-class backgrounds. Schools utilise behaviour management methods, for example, that middle-class children routinely encounter within their home environment. These students are thus better able to respond to the demands placed on them by schools than working-class children. Similarly, middle-class parents already possess the cultural assets needed to successfully negotiate the school system, giving them an advantage over their working-class counterparts. Weininger and Lareau also utilised the notion of ‘habitus’ – the dispositions held by individuals – to explain how social class, culture and prior experiences shape the thoughts and actions of individuals. Weininger and Lareau viewed the family home as the place where habitus is initially formed, with the school system providing a mechanism through which students were effectively sorted according to social class. They thus interpreted their findings in terms of the social position of individuals, the cultural resources available to them and their class-based dispositions. Weininger and Lareau noted, however, that the links between home and school were not ‘hidden’ as Bourdieu suggested, but highly visible

and actively promoted through educational policy and practices such as parent-teacher conversations. This approach stands in contrast to Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's model (section 2.2.2) in which the focus is placed on individual agency.

In keeping with MacLure and Walker (2000), Weininger and Lareau noted the uniform, ritualistic nature of meetings, the interactional absence of students (even when physically present), the tendency for the participants to present themselves as good parents or competent professionals, and the symbolic rather than practical significance of these events. However, they also observed significant differences between middle-class and working-class parents in terms of their ability to communicate during meetings, with the former being more able to take in and understand teachers' talk and elicit useful information. Weininger and Lareau also found variations in the authority relationships between parents of differing social class. Middle-class parents were more willing to contest assessments relating to their children, make judgements about the teacher, and ask for – and get – individual treatment for their child. Moreover, they detected an undercurrent of hostility during encounters between middle-class parents and teachers:

...we were often able to discern clashing assertions of authority – almost never overtly antagonistic, yet still readily apparent – over the child's education.

Weininger and Lareau, 2003, p.392

It would thus appear that Weininger and Lareau viewed parent-teacher meetings involving middle-class parents in terms of conflict and challenge. By contrast, they found that working-class parents tended to be passive during meetings and readily ceded control of both the conversation and the education of their child to the teacher. They concluded that parent-teacher meetings, far from mitigating 'disparities attributable to social origin', provided a mechanism through which they could exert an influence (Weininger and Lareau, 2003, p.400). Additionally, they pointed out that the notion of parents as equal partners was problematic since it deflected attention away from schools and shifted the responsibility for educational failure onto families.

Weininger and Lareau's research is relevant to my thesis for several reasons. Firstly, their investigation provides evidence based on actual conversations between parents and teachers, supported by in-depth interviews and extensive classroom observation, which calls into question the notion of parent-teacher partnership based on mutual goals and shared responsibility. Moreover, Weininger and Lareau's theoretical framework explains why some groups might achieve greater educational success than others in terms of wider social and cultural factors, thus providing an alternative to deficit models of underachievement in which individuals are held to account for educational failure. Indeed, their findings suggest that more than one model of parent-teacher interaction may be at play, depending on the social class backgrounds of the parents involved. On the one hand, working-class parents allowed the teachers to direct conversations and deferred to their authority, in keeping with the 'expert' model of parent-teacher interaction I described in section 2.2.2.

On the other, middle-class parents acted as ‘consumers’ by advocating on behalf of their children and requesting individually-tailored treatment for them – also outlined in section 2.2.2. Additionally, Weininger and Lareau’s study provides an instructive example of what critical research means in practice and coincides with my personal interest in the relationship between social class and educational outcomes – a point I will return to in section 3.6.2 when I discuss the potential for researcher bias.

There are several limitations associated with Weininger and Lareau’s study which I will now consider. Firstly, the ‘middle-class’ meetings that they recorded all involved the same – relatively young – teacher. The nature of these conversations might thus have been influenced by the personal qualities of this individual or the characteristics of her school rather than the social-class background of the parents involved. Whilst Weininger and Lareau provide supporting evidence to suggest that this was unlikely, they acknowledge that the possibility could be ruled out. Secondly, the conversations observed by Weininger and Lareau – in contrast to those recorded by MacLure and Walker (2000) – all took place in the presence of a researcher. According to Labov (1972), the act of observing individuals would change their behaviour, raising questions regarding how ‘natural’ these conversations really were – I will return to this point in section 3.4.2. Also, Weininger and Lareau defined families as ‘middle-class’ or ‘working-class’ according to the occupations of the parents. It could be argued that the notion of social class is not so straightforward and that other factors may be at play. Moreover, they labelled families rather than individuals, though in some cases

the parents involved had occupations which would have placed them in different categories. Additionally, Weininger and Lareau's analysis does not appear to be conducted at the micro-level that they claim. As for MacLure and Walker (2000), they make no reference to the significance of conversational features such as laughter, pauses or overlapping talk – all of which would be routinely considered using an approach based on conversation analysis (Heritage, 2004). This raises the possibility that they could have missed important aspects of the interactions taking place. I would add that Weininger and Lareau's theoretical approach focuses on factors which are beyond the immediate control of the participants. Seen from this perspective, parents and their children could be seen as helpless in the face of wider social and cultural forces, thus shifting the responsibility for educational underachievement away from individuals and making positive action less likely.

2.3.4 Conversational Control

A number of researchers have reported the ways in which teachers utilise their professional knowledge and status to exert control during conversations (MacLure and Walker, 2000; Symeou, 2003; Markstrom, 2011; Cheatham and Ostrosky, 2011; 2013; Inglis, 2012; 2014; Matthiesen, 2015), thus providing support for the 'expert' model of parent-teacher interaction (Hornby, 2011) which I outlined in section 2.2.2. Of these studies, I have selected those conducted by Symeou (2003), Cheatham and Ostrosky (2011; 2013), and Inglis (2012; 2014) for detailed consideration in this section since they illustrate the key features of Hornby's model across a wide range of

educational contexts. As the teacher's authority was not contested by the parents involved in these studies, I have considered them separately from those of the previous section in which parents and teachers were viewed as opponents. I have also made the distinction between 'authority' – the influence that teachers have over parents due to their professional position, knowledge or skills – and 'power' – the capacity for schools or teachers to compel parents to act in certain ways.

I will begin with Symeou (2003), who has conducted a multiple case-study involving seven teachers at six primary schools in Cyprus. This involved direct observation of meetings between parents and teachers, as well as individual and focus group interviews. Symeou used audio recordings of meetings to identify the topics of conversation which emerged during parent-teacher conversations and to quantify how the talk which took place was divided between the participants and between different topics. He then interviewed parents to explore their views regarding the action they undertook following meetings. Whilst he did not refer to a specific conceptual framework, he appears to have interpreted his findings in terms of the differing ability of certain groups of parents to understand and act upon the information and advice they had received from the teacher. This seems compatible with Weininger and Lareau (2003) – see section 2.3.3 – who used the notion of cultural capital to explain how middle-class parents and their children were more likely to be successful within schools than their working-class counterparts.

Based on transcripts of audio recordings, Symeou (2003, p.5) found that parent-teacher meetings were 'dominated' by the teacher. Approximately 70% of the talk taking place during meetings consisted of information transmitted from the teacher to the parent, with just over half of this being related to student attainment. Whilst teachers tended not to request information from parents, they did enquire about the home study arrangements during those meetings which occurred early in the academic year – the time when such information would have been most useful. Teachers also made frequent reference to students' written work and test results, and recruited various sources of evidence in order to demonstrate student attainment to parents. For their part, parents contributed information only in response to questions from the teacher or after the teacher had identified a specific issue for discussion. On these occasions, they presented information about their children's study habits and personal characteristics, though they never offered advice to teachers on matters relating to learning. This is in agreement with the findings reported by Weininger and Lareau (2003) with regard to working-class parents – see section 2.3.3. Additionally, Symeou reported that all of the parents involved intended to use the information or advice they had received. However, he found that their subsequent actions varied widely, with different families employing different strategies in response to teachers' advice. In keeping with the studies I reviewed in section 2.3.1, Symeou (2003, p.21) concluded that parents were 'subordinate or kept in subjection by teachers' expertise and professional knowledge', noting that the one-sided nature of the exchanges which took place during parent-teacher meetings reflected the 'powerlessness' of parents.

Symeou's findings are significant to my thesis since they provide quantitative evidence to show that teachers produce most of the talk during parent-teacher meetings. They also show that the flow of information was predominantly from school to home, with parents being positioned as receivers of information and advice. This is in agreement with those researchers who have described how teachers are accorded the right to control conversations and do most of the talking (MacLure and Walker, 2000; Weininger and Lareau, 2003; Matthiesen, 2015). The conversations that Symeou recorded, however, all took place within primary schools in Cyprus and may not, therefore, be applicable to other contexts. A distinctive feature of the Cypriot education system, for example, is that schools are required to set aside time each week for teachers to meet with parents – though Symeou does not make clear who initiates these meetings or how frequently individual parents attend them. This arrangement might have resulted in more trusting relationships developing between parents and teachers over time, raising the possibility of contrasting patterns of talk emerging at different points during the school year. Indeed, it would have been interesting to have tracked the nature of the conversations between parents and teachers as their working relationship developed. The availability of an open surgery might also have resulted in a higher proportion of meetings focused on resolving problems and less contact with the parents of students who were making satisfactory or good progress, which would again alter the nature of the conversations observed. Additionally, these meetings appear to have been scheduled during the school day, meaning that non-working parents would be disproportionately represented in the sample.

This could also have affected the nature of the talk taking place since differences between the roles played by fathers and mothers, and between parents of differing occupational status have been reported elsewhere in the literature (Weininger and Lareau, 2003). I will return to this problem when I consider the limitations of my research in section 7.1.

Cheatham and Ostrosky have also conducted research which relates to the 'expert' role played by teachers during parent-teacher meetings (Cheatham and Ostrosky, 2011), in this case within a U.S. pre-school centre serving children with disabilities or considered 'at risk'. As for Pillet-Shore (2004) – see section 2.3.2 – Cheatham and Ostrosky used conversation analysis to interpret their data in terms of the immediate interactional context of participants' talk – what has just been said – rather than wider contexts such as social class. In contrast with Pillet-Shore, however, they adopted a mixed methods approach in which they utilised data from both direct recordings of conversations and follow-up interviews. This is in keeping with Symeou (2003), whose work I reviewed earlier in this section. Cheatham and Ostrosky focused on the ways in which advice was given or received between parents and teachers, and considered how their findings related to the partnership philosophy promoted within the field of parental involvement – see section 2.2.3. They found that parents and teachers 'constructed their roles such that teachers were advice givers and parents were advice seekers' (Cheatham and Ostrosky, 2011, p.24). Moreover, they found that teachers did not recognise parents' specialist knowledge, in keeping with other researchers (MacLure and Walker, 2000; Matthiesen, 2015). Cheatham and Ostrosky

noted, however, that teachers were also keen to build positive relationships and avoid blaming parents – behaviour which I will relate to my findings in section 5.1.2. They concluded that equal partnerships between parents and teachers were ‘challenging for educators’ (2011, p.39), in support of those researchers within the wider parental involvement literature who have suggested that such relationships do not occur in reality – see section 2.2.3. They did not dismiss the notion of partnership, however, and proposed ways to challenge the ‘default’ roles of layperson and expert adopted by parents and teachers respectively.

Cheatham and Ostrosky conducted a second study which is relevant to my thesis, this time based in pre-school centres serving mainly Latino families with relatively high levels of domestic poverty (Cheatham and Ostrosky, 2013). In this investigation, they focused on goal-setting behaviour and how the nature and function of parent-teacher talk differed between English-speaking, Spanish-speaking and bilingual parents. Cheatham and Ostrosky found that participants had different expectations about their roles during conferences, with teachers and native English parents tending to see them as opportunities ‘to exchange information to better understand the child’ and Latino parents expecting ‘more directive teacher roles’ (ibid., p.176). They also found that teachers constructed themselves as goal-setters and used a variety of conversational strategies to prompt or guide parents. In keeping with the class-based differences in parental behaviour reported by others (Weininger and Lareau, 2003; Symeou, 2003), this was particularly so in meetings with Spanish-speaking parents. Also, whilst teachers subscribed to the notion of

partnership during interviews, quantitative evidence showed that they did far more of the talking – again most pronounced with Spanish-speakers – and that this talk was more directive. In keeping with their previous research, Cheatham and Ostrosky concluded that families and school faced ‘challenges to goal-setting partnerships’ (ibid., p.166) and that bringing parents and teachers together for face-to-face meetings did not necessarily result in collaboration.

In terms of methodology, Cheatham and Ostrosky’s research provides an instructive example of how recordings of actual parent-teacher conversations can be usefully combined with interview evidence, thus supporting my decision to collect data from multiple sources – see section 3.4. Indeed, the discrepancies that they reported between the interview responses of teachers and their actual talk during meetings emphasises the need for direct observation. With regard to my research question regarding parent-teacher relationships, Cheatham and Ostrosky showed that teachers tended to adopt the role of ‘expert’ and control meetings, in agreement with MacLure and Walker (2000), Symeou (2003), and Matthiesen (2015), thus supporting the notion that equal partnerships between parents and teachers do not occur in practice (section 2.2.3). Their second study also showed that the cultural or linguistic background of parents can have a significant effect on the nature of the talk which takes place during parent-teacher meetings, in keeping with the idea that parent-related factors can act as ‘barriers’ to partnership (section 2.2.4). As for Matthiesen (2015), however, both of Cheatham and Ostrosky’s studies involved participants and settings that might be considered unusual,

thus limiting the relevance of their findings to other contexts. The teacher participants involved in their first study, for example, had a higher level of education than might be expected in such a setting, calling into question how typical these conversations were. Indeed, it could be argued that the teachers in this study would have been more likely to give advice to the parents of children who were considered 'at risk' or had been raised within a disadvantaged home environment. Similarly, Cheatham and Ostrosky's second study involved only Spanish-speaking parents who spoke English well enough to do without an interpreter, meaning that their sample did not represent all Latino parents. Moreover, the Spanish-speaking parents in this study had lower educational attainment than their English-speaking counterparts and this might have been the underlying cause for the differences they reported.

Inglis (2012; 2014) has also reported evidence to support the one-sided nature of parent-teacher relationships, this time in two contrasting Scottish primary schools. As for Symeou (2003), she found that the teachers in her study used their authority to set the agenda and act as information providers, thus preserving their professional status. Inglis also described how the organisation of parent-teacher meetings maintained power differences between parents and teachers, in agreement with those studies I reviewed in section 2.3.1. Schools, for example, decided where and when meetings would take place, their physical layout and their duration, whilst parents had limited access to their children's work and little time to assimilate relevant school documents. Inglis noted that the actions of teachers and the way in which

meetings were organised meant that parents felt restricted in the part they could play. Indeed, they were reluctant to assert their rights or intervene on behalf of their children since this would risk being labelled as ‘problems’ or ‘adversaries’, behaviour which has also been reported by other researchers (Lemmer, 2012; Matthiesen, 2015; Weininger and Lareau, 2003). Inglis concluded that, despite changes to educational policy, parent-teacher meetings had not moved beyond the expert-layperson model – see section 2.2.2 – and were in need of review. In keeping with other researchers within the field of parental involvement (section 2.2.3), she also cast doubt on the likelihood of parent-teacher partnerships emerging from these events. Inglis suggested re-naming these meetings so as to better reflect the expectations of parents and teachers, making clear their purpose and the roles of those involved – though she does not specify whether this would be jointly negotiated or simply communicated to parents. As for Barton et al. (2004) – see section 2.2.2, she also suggested that teachers should be encouraged to listen and learn as well as provide expertise.

The findings presented by Inglis show that both parents and teachers experienced difficulties and frustrations during parent-teacher meetings, thus providing support for those researchers who have described parent-teacher meetings as problematic (Walker, 1998; Lemmer, 2012). In keeping with the other studies in this section (Symeou, 2003; Cheatham and Ostrosky, 2011; 2013), her findings also support the ‘expert’ model (section 2.2.2) and so relate directly to my research question concerning parent-teacher relationships. Moreover, she suggested a shift in the balance of power

between parents and teachers, with some parents acting in the role of 'consumer' and seeking to intervene or advocate in learning-related matters. According to Inglis, this created tensions as teachers tried to maintain their professional status whilst parents attempted to assert their consumer rights. Her study thus provides support for those researchers who have interpreted their findings in adversarial terms (section 2.3.3). However, Inglis' research also carries with it certain limitations. Firstly, her study was small-scale and limited in scope, being conducted within three similar primary schools in the same area of central Scotland. Also, the teachers who participated in her study were all volunteers – as opposed to the parents who were randomly selected – raising the possibility that the conversations were not representative of all the meetings taking place at these schools. Additionally, Inglis did not directly observe specific meetings but based her findings on the diary entries and interview responses of participants. As I have previously noted with regard to Lemmer (2012), such data might be less reliable due to the influence of the researcher or the incomplete recollection of participants – see section 3.4 for a more detailed discussion of these points.

2.3.5 Harm Avoidance

In this section, I will review examples of research which have focused on the potential for parents and teachers to cause one another harm during parent-teacher meetings, or on the defensive measures taken by them to avoid or reduce harmful outcomes (Pillet-Shore, 2012; 2015; 2016; Tveit, 2007; 2009; Markstrom, 2011). Whilst these studies have identified some of the tensions

and risks associated with parent-teacher meetings, they differ from those I reviewed in section 2.3.3 since they have not assumed that the individuals concerned were hostile towards one another. Indeed, these studies suggest that, in some situations, parents and teachers show concern for one another's welfare or work together to strengthen relationships. They are thus relevant to my research question relating to the relationships between parents and teachers – see section 1.3.

I will begin this section with Pillet-Shore (2012; 2015; 2016) – see section 2.3.2 for my review of her earlier study – since her work has strongly influenced both my theoretical outlook and analytical approach. As for her previous research, these studies also utilised conversation analysis and were based on recordings of parent-teacher meetings in four contrasting U.S. primary schools. In the first of these papers (Pillet-Shore, 2012), she focused on the actions of giving and receiving praise, and the difficulties that this created for those involved. Pillet-Shore utilised the notions of 'face' (Goffman, 1967; Brown and Levinson, 1987) and 'solidarity' (Heritage, 1984) to interpret her data – ideas which I will also draw on throughout chapter five when I discuss my own findings. She found that, when a teacher praised a non-present student, the parent responded as if they had been complimented themselves, thus raising the notion of parents and their children as a single social entity – an idea I will return to in my discussion (section 5.1.2) and when I make recommendations for further research (section 6.2). Pillet-Shore also noted that parents tended to avoid making favourable comments regarding their own children – which could be seen as self-praise – and, when they did

so, they worked to avoid appearing boastful. Additionally, she found that, when teachers explicitly credited student achievement to parents, this was typically accompanied by laughter, thus revealing the delicate nature of these utterances. Pillet-Shore suggested that teachers were evaluating parents based upon the performance of their children in school and that these moments revealed 'an embarrassing "crack" in the surface of the official business of the conference' (Pillet-Shore, 2012, p.201), an interpretation which relates closely to my own findings – see section 5.1. She concluded that sequences of talk which involved student praise were problematic for both parents and teachers and not the enjoyable occasions that might be expected.

In the second of these papers, Pillet-Shore (2015) examined the way in which parents and teachers handled student criticism during parent-teacher meetings. She found that, when teachers praised students, parents tended to respond as if they were receiving new information. When teachers criticised students, however, parents routinely indicated that they already knew of the problem before explaining what steps they had already taken to put things right. Moreover, both parties tacitly collaborated to allow parents to be the first to articulate any student shortcomings. Pillet-Shore suggested that the parents and teachers in her study did this in order to avoid any suggestion that the parent was to blame, thus maintaining solidarity (Heritage, 1984) and preserving 'face' (Goffman, 1967). She also suggested that parents worked to present themselves as 'reasonable and credible' (Pillet-Shore, 2015, p.19) by showing that they were willing to express their child's shortcomings. Indeed, by pointing out the corrective measures they had taken, these parents

conveyed to the teacher that the problem was not due to their negligence. Additionally, she reported that, once a parent had brought a problem into the open, the teacher then discussed joint solutions. Where the parent did not do so, however, teachers suggested corrective action for the parent rather than the student. Pillet-Shore concluded that, if parents did not demonstrate that they were good at doing their 'job', then they faced the possibility that the teacher would treat them as responsible for the trouble and its resolution. I will consider how these findings relate to my own study when I discuss parent-teacher relationships in sections 5.2.3 and 5.2.4.

In her most recent study, Pillet-Shore again focused on conversations involving student criticism (Pillet-Shore, 2016). This time, however, she considered the behaviour of the teachers, specifically the strategies that they adopted to avoid conflict with parents. Pillet-Shore divided these measures into two broad categories: 'obfuscation of responsibility' and 'routinizing student-troubles' (ibid., p. 33). In the first of these, teachers used various tactics to avoid directly linking the student concerned with the problem being reported. For example, they omitted possessive pronouns – 'the quality of work' as opposed to 'the quality of *her* work' – or switched pronouns from third-person singular to first-person plural – 'we' instead of 'he' or 'she'. This seems in keeping with MacLure and Walker (2000) – see section 2.3.3 – who noted that teachers tended to criticise students indirectly since this could be seen as a challenge to parents. In the second strategy teachers played down any difficulty associated with the student in question by presenting it as an ordinary occurrence or one shared by others. Again, this could be brought

about in a variety of ways. Some teachers, for example, remarked on other children in the same class who were in a similar situation, or suggested that the problem in question was to be expected for students of a given age group or gender. As for her earlier work, Pillet-Shore interpreted these findings using the concepts of 'solidarity' (Heritage, 1984) and 'face' (Goffman, 1967). She concluded that the measures employed by teachers effectively depersonalised their criticism of students, 'thus defusing and diffusing the toxicity of the student-criticism' (Pillet-Shore, 2016, p.53) and so reducing the likelihood of conflict. The defensive measures which have emerged from Pillet-Shore's study carry implications for my study which I will discuss in section 5.2.1.

In terms of methodology, Pillet-Shore's analytical approach has demonstrated how apparently insignificant conversational features can reveal the ways in which parents and teachers go about achieving their goals. Her research has thus influenced my decision to analyse the parent-teacher conversations I recorded using conversation analysis – see section 3.5. Moreover, Pillet-Shore's later work has pointed to the potential for politeness theory (Brown and Levinson, 1987) to explain the defensive nature of parent-teacher talk. I will provide a detailed account of this theoretical framework – which I have used to interpret my findings – in section 2.4. With regard to the relationships between parents and teachers, Pillet-Shore's studies are significant since they show how seemingly innocuous acts – praising a student, for example – can involve awkwardness and risk for both parents and teachers. Moreover, they provide evidence to show that the participants involved were aware of the potential for their talk to cause harm, both to themselves and one another. As

for the studies I reviewed in sections 2.3.1 and 2.3.3, her research thus provides evidence to suggest that parent-teacher partnerships based on open communication and trust may be an aspiration rather than a reality. In contrast to the research I reviewed in those sections, however, Pillet-Shore's work suggests that the wish to avoid harm – rather than hostility or the desire to control conversations – could account for the nature of the parent-teacher conversations she observed. Pillet-Shore's findings are thus relevant to my research questions regarding both the aims of participants and their relationships.

Whilst providing detailed, well-supported insights into the workings of parent-teacher meetings, Pillet-Shore's later studies carry with them the same restrictions regarding *a priori* theory and background contexts that I noted when reviewing her earlier work – see section 2.3.2. Also, Pillet-Shore's research was based on data collected from 2000 to 2002, some thirteen years before the publication of her most recent paper. Given the changes which have occurred within the U.S. education system during this time (Sass, 2017), it could be argued that her findings would have been more convincing had she utilised more up-to-date evidence. Perhaps more importantly, it could be argued that Pillet-Shore has not entirely managed to achieve the 'unmotivated looking' – the disinterested inspection of data from no particular theoretical perspective – which has been promoted as the ideal within the field of conversation analysis (Mondada, 2013). In her more recent work, for example, she refers to social control through surveillance (Foucault, 1977, cited in Pillet-Shore, 2015, p. 2), identity construction (Goffman, 1959, cited in Pillet-Shore,

2015, p. 2) and 'face' (Brown and Levinson, 1987, cited in Pillet-Shore, 2016, p. 33). Additionally, Pillet-Shore collected ethnographic evidence in the form of interviews and observations during her three year field study, though she provides no further details and it is unclear how this contextual knowledge influenced the way she interpreted her findings. Moreover, the use of such data would be inconsistent with her strict adherence to the methodological requirements of 'pure' conversation analysis – see section 3.5.

In contrast to Pillet-Shore, Tveit (2007; 2009) has combined the direct observation of parent-teacher meetings with interview data. She recorded conversations involving the parents of children with special educational needs in five Norwegian primary schools and interpreted her findings in terms of Habermas' theory of communicative action (Habermas, 1984, cited in Tveit, 2007, pp. 200-201). According to this theory, meaningful dialogue between individuals can only take place if certain conditions are met. For example, the participants must be truthful and express their genuine aims, thoughts and feelings. They must also be oriented towards reaching mutual understanding rather than promoting their own point of view. She found that the parents and teachers in her studies did not consider honest, open dialogue to be the best form of communication during parent-teacher meetings. Indeed, Tveit noted that the participants 'awarded preference to what they regarded as morally right, following conventions of tact' (Tveit, 2009, p.250) and glossed over the truth in order to protect the feelings of others. This stands in contrast to Pillet-Shore (2016) who regarded harm avoidance in terms of self-defence. Tveit also found that parents and teachers were less likely to be truthful about their

intentions, thoughts or feelings when students were present, and that this restricted the range of topics that were discussed. Additionally, she reported that teachers were more likely to be tactful rather than truthful where there was the potential for disagreement with parents. In such situations, teachers tended to express their agreement whilst actually intending to bring parents around to their point of view in the long-term. Tveit concluded that the parents and teachers in her studies were not completely open with one another and used the concept of 'face' (Goffman, 1967) to explain why individuals might choose not to engage in communicative action.

In terms of methodology, Tveit's studies are relevant to the design of my own investigation since they reveal how participants' comments during interviews can add depth and meaning that would not be available from an analysis of recorded conversations alone – see section 3.4. She has also drawn attention to the ways in which students influence the nature of parent-teacher meetings – I will discuss how this relates to the behaviour of the parents and teachers in my study in section 5.1.1. Additionally, the notion of strategic action, in which parents and teachers work to achieve their long-term goals by indirect means, has provided a useful perspective from which to view my findings (section 5.1.2). Tveit's research, however, carries with it certain limitations. Firstly, both of her studies were small-scale and set within a specific context, meaning that her findings cannot necessarily be applied to other settings – a limitation which also applies to my own investigation (section 7.1). Also, the conversations that she investigated were selected by the teachers involved, raising the possibility that her sample was not representative. Indeed, Tveit

herself noted that her selection process was prone to bias and that her data included no 'difficult' conversations. Also, not all of her conversations were directly recorded, raising questions regarding the reliability of her data. Indeed, six (out of 13) meetings and three (out of 21) interviews were based on observational notes rather than recordings, and four of her interviews were based on parent-teacher conversations that she had neither observed nor recorded. Moreover, Tveit was present for all the conversations that she did record. As I noted in my review of MacLure and Walker (2000), this calls into question how natural such talk could be – a point I will return to in section 3.4.2.

Markstrom (2011) – whose earlier paper I reviewed in section 2.3.2 – has conducted a case-study within a Swedish pre-school which provides further evidence to show that parents and teachers work to avoid harm during their meetings. She adopted a theoretical approach based on the idea that the talk between people is constrained by the discourse within which it takes place, meaning that individuals can only be constructed in certain ways (Fairclough, 2003). Markstrom focused on an unusual practice in which the teacher used commercially-available 'strength cards' as a way to structure meetings and facilitate conversation. Each card displayed an adjective that could be used to describe the student, who was not present, and parents were asked to suggest which ones applied to their child. Taken at face value, this practice would thus appear to be a practical means of supporting parents – who might feel intimidated in a formal school meeting or find it difficult to articulate their thoughts – and so facilitate their active involvement. However, Markstrom's

analysis of the conversations which took place revealed a 'hidden' agenda, with the cards also providing a mechanism through which parents were encouraged to state their opinion, label their child or reveal sensitive information. She pointed out that, whilst the 'strength cards' may have facilitated involvement and collaboration, they were also used as a strategy which allowed the teacher to distance herself from the sensitive business of student categorisation and continue the conversation based on the parents' assessment. In keeping with the notion of conversational control (section 2.3.4), she also noted that the teacher decided beforehand which cards to present to parents – thus restricting their choice – and then directed them towards the 'right' answer. Moreover, Markstrom pointed out that the teacher did not give her reasons for using the cards at the start of the meeting and that their use was not questioned by parents, thus revealing a tacitly understood agreement that it was the teacher who dictated the structure and content of the meeting.

As for other researchers (Cheatham and Ostrosky, 2013; Matthiesen, 2015), Markstrom's findings illustrate how the motives expressed by participants during their interviews do not necessarily correspond to the talk which takes place when they meet face-to-face. Her study thus carries implications for my own research design which I will consider further in section 3.4. With regard to parent-teacher relationships, Markstrom's research is important since it shows how an apparently neutral artefact – in this case 'strength cards' – can be used by the teacher to control conversations and avoid personal exposure to risk. Her study thus shows that the aims of participants during parent-teacher

meetings are not necessarily concerned with the educational outcomes of students, and calls into question the notion of partnership based on mutual support and trust (see section 2.2.3). Moreover, her findings are in agreement with Pillet-Shore's (2016) description of parents and teachers working to maintain 'face', and Tveit's (2009) notion of strategic or indirect action by teachers to achieve their goals. Markstrom's study, however, was based on only two conversations, both taking place within a single pre-school context and involving the same teacher. As for Weininger and Lareau (2003) – see section 2.3.3 – this raises the possibility that her findings were specific to the circumstances of the setting or personal characteristics of the individuals concerned. Moreover, Markstrom's interpretation is not the only way to account for her data. The teacher's account for the use of these cards – as a way to encourage parents to participate in conversations – seems equally plausible and Markstrom does not provide evidence to show why her version of events should be favoured. Additionally, Markstrom did not interview the parents involved and it would have been interesting to have heard their opinions. Indeed, they might have revealed alternative perspectives that she had not previously considered.

2.4 Politeness Theory

As I noted in section 2.3.5, Tveit (e.g. 2009) utilised the concept of 'face' (Goffman, 1967) to explain why the teachers in her studies acted tactfully rather than truthfully, though she did not make this idea central to her argument. Similarly, Pillet-Shore (e.g. 2016) used politeness theory (Brown

and Levinson, 1987) – based on the concept of ‘face’ – to account for the ways in which parents and teachers worked to minimise harm or create positive identities for themselves, though her adherence to the methodology of conversation analysis – which rejects the use of *a priori* theory – may have made her reluctant to fully explore the utility of this approach. It would thus appear that, of the studies I reviewed in section 2.3, only two researchers have used the concept of ‘face’ to account for their findings and then only in a limited way. I would argue, however, that this is a potentially useful explanatory tool in the study of parent-teacher conversations. Indeed, I would suggest that ‘face’ could have been used to account for the majority of the research evidence which has emerged from the studies reviewed in section 2.3. Since I will use both the concept of ‘face’ and politeness theory to interpret my own findings throughout my discussion, I will now consider this conceptual framework in more detail.

According to Goffman (1967, p.5), all adults have an ‘image of self’ or ‘face’ that they present to others during social encounters and which will vary depending on the social situation and the audience. Brown and Levinson (1987, p.61) have taken this notion further by suggesting that individuals possess both positive and negative ‘face’. They defined positive ‘face’ as ‘the consistent self-image or personality (crucially including the desire that this self-image be appreciated and approved of) claimed by interactants’, and negative ‘face’ as ‘the basic claim to territories, personal preserves, rights to non-distraction – the freedom of action and freedom from imposition’. Positive ‘face’ thus refers to an individual’s sense of self-worth, whereas negative ‘face’

relates to a person's freedom to act unimpeded. Brown and Levinson described face-threatening acts as those that carry the potential to damage the 'face' of either the person speaking or listening. Loss of positive 'face' can be caused when individuals show that they do not care about the feelings or needs of another or that they do not share the same interests – for instance, by ignoring someone. By contrast, loss of negative 'face' occurs when a person hinders or inconveniences another or limits their freedom of choice, for example, by making a request. Brown and Levinson suggested that maintaining or enhancing 'face' is an essential need for all individuals when they interact in social situations. Moreover, they proposed that face-threatening acts form an inherent part of ordinary social interaction, meaning that all social encounters – including parent-teacher meetings – will carry an element of personal risk. Seen in this light, challenges to teachers' authority – see section 2.3.3 – could be regarded as threats to their positive 'face', whilst controlling conversations – see section 2.3.4 – might be viewed as threats to the negative 'face' of parents.

According to Brown and Levinson (1987, p. 68), individuals will seek to 'minimize the threat' caused by their actions in situations where there is the potential for loss of 'face'. To achieve this, they can select from a range of options – termed politeness strategies. The decision-making process involved in this selection can be summarised as follows:

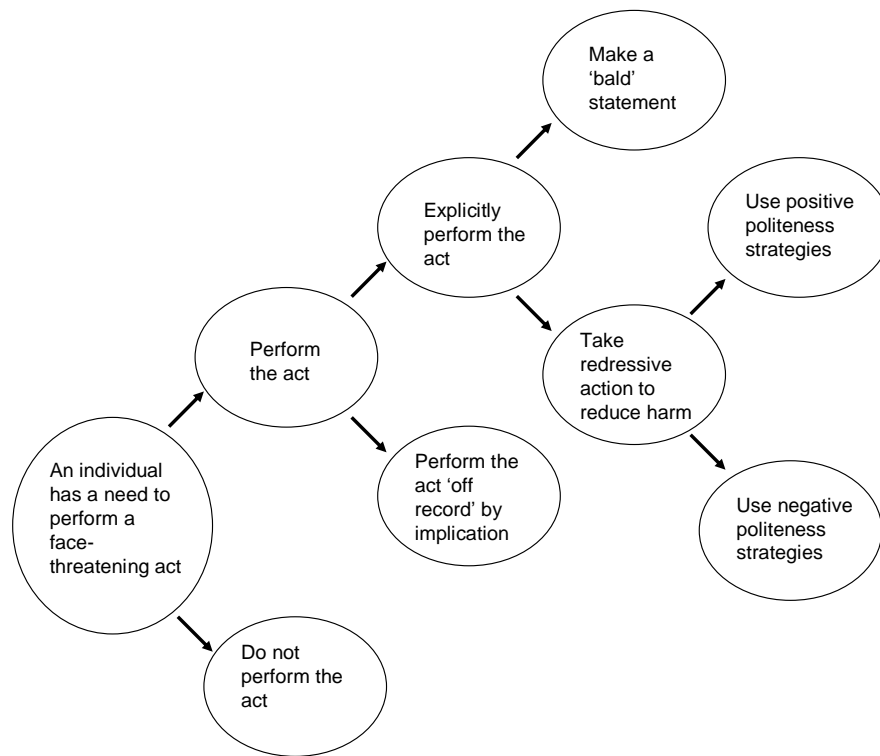


Figure 1: Selecting politeness strategies (Brown and Levinson, 1987, p.69)

As this figure shows, a speaker who had chosen to perform a face-threatening act would then have to decide whether to do so directly ('on-record') or indirectly ('off-record'). An 'off-record' strategy might be selected by an individual if there was a particular need to avoid imposing on the recipient. The tendency for teachers to give advice to parents indirectly (Cheatham and Ostrosky, 2011) – see section 2.3 – could be viewed in this light. Where there was less need for caution, an individual might select an 'on-record' strategy but use redressive action so as to minimise its impact. Brown and Levinson (1987) proposed that such action can take two forms. Positive redressive action is orientated towards making the hearer feel good (and is likely to be used where the speaker and listener know each other well), whilst negative redressive action can be used to play down an imposition which is being

placed on the listener (and would be expected where there was greater potential for awkwardness or embarrassment). As for 'off-record' actions, these strategies are consistent with the literature I reviewed in section 2.3 (MacLure and Walker, 2000; Tveit, 2009; Pillet-Shore, 2016). A further possibility is that a face-threatening act could be performed unmitigated or 'bald' with no attempt to minimise harm to the listener. Such an approach might shock or embarrass the recipient and so would be used only when urgent action was required or in situations where the speaker was very familiar with the listener. It could be argued that these scenarios would be unlikely to occur during formal parent-teacher meetings, meaning that 'bald' strategies would not be selected. As I will show in section 4.6, however, unmitigated actions were not unknown in the exchanges which took place between parents and their children.

Brown and Levinson (1987, p.74) argued that the strategy chosen by a speaker depends on three factors: the social distance between individuals (how well they know each other), their relative power, and the 'seriousness' of the face-threatening act to be performed. A teacher, for example, might select a more cautious strategy when meeting a parent of similar social status for the first time. By contrast, the same teacher might be less guarded when speaking to a student with whom he/she was familiar. This has implications for my research since it suggests that the strategies chosen by participants could provide insights into the nature of their relationships. I will return to this point in section 5.2 when I consider how different models for parent-teacher interaction relate to the behaviour of the parents and teachers in my study.

Brown and Levinson's theory is widely applicable and has been used by researchers to account for individuals' talk in a variety of contexts, both English speaking and non-English speaking (Shahrokhi, 2013). Indeed, their theory has been described as 'influential' by several researchers (Eelen, 2001, p.3; Vilkki, 2006, p.324; Gilkes, 2010, p.95) and continues to be used more than thirty years after it was first proposed (e.g. Wang, 2014). However, politeness theory has also attracted considerable criticism and a variety of theoretical difficulties have been raised (Watts, 2003; Al-Hindawi and Alkhazaali, 2016). Firstly, Brown and Levinson (1987, p. 56) based their theory on 'universal principles', though they provided supporting evidence from only three languages. This has caused some to question whether the concept of 'face' or the politeness strategies used by individuals would be the same across all cultures (Vilkki, 2006). Negative politeness, for example, might be more likely in societies which place greater value on the interests of groups rather than individuals (Lim, 1994). Brown and Levinson also focused on personal harm, thus leading researchers to take an unduly negative view of social relationships. Nwoye (1992, p. 311), for example, stated that politeness theory sees only the 'continuous mutual monitoring of potential threats' and so ignores the more positive aspects of interactions between individuals. Given the notion of intrinsic conflict between parents and teachers (section 2.2.5) and the adversarial perspective adopted by some researchers (section 2.3.3), this point seems particularly pertinent to my thesis. Additionally, Brown and Levinson did not consider the effects of non-verbal communication, the sequential position of a given action or the way in which the hearer might

interpret a given speech act, all of which could exacerbate or mitigate a face-threatening act (Arundale, 2006). They also assumed individuals to be rational agents acting in consistent, predictable ways and so did not take into account the personal habits or current mood of the speaker (Werkhofer, 1992).

Summary

Epstein's typology

The term parental involvement can take many forms, meaning that a simple, general definition is of limited practical use. Epstein's typology has been widely cited and breaks involvement down into six distinct types: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making and collaborating with the community. There are, however, a number of problems associated with Epstein's framework. Firstly, it is not based on what parents do in reality, but focuses instead on what they could do to assist teachers or schools. Moreover, parents might be viewed as inadequate if the practices listed by Epstein are seen as things that should – rather than could – be done. Also, her framework is based on the assumptions that more involvement is better and that relationships between parents and teachers should take the form of equal partnership, both of which have been questioned by other researchers. Additionally, the popularity of Epstein's framework could limit the thinking of researchers if they do not consider alternative classification systems.

Theoretical frameworks

Epstein's theory of overlapping spheres and Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's model have been used by researchers to support the argument for increased parental involvement. Epstein's theory emphasises the family, school and community as important interacting systems. Epstein assumed that the needs of children are best met when these systems work together towards common goals and that this can be facilitated by schools and teachers. However, her theory does not take into account the less obvious features of involvement or recognise parental inaction as a deliberate strategy. By contrast, Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler considered parental involvement to occur on different levels, the overall aim being successful academic performance. They focused primarily on psychological factors – thus complementing Epstein's sociological approach – and considered the mechanisms through which individual parents might influence educational outcomes. However, Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler did not consider involvement from the perspective of teachers or schools, thus placing responsibility on parents and students in situations where problems occur.

Problems with parental involvement

There is a large body of evidence to indicate that parental involvement is beneficial for students' education and that parents and teachers see it as a good thing. Moreover, some researchers have promoted the notion of involvement based on mutually supportive, equitable relationships between

parents and teachers. There are, however, difficulties for those who advocate such partnerships. Some researchers, for example, have reported that parental involvement based on the notion of equality tends not to occur in practice and have accounted for this in terms of 'barriers' between home and school. These are wide-ranging and include the demographic characteristics of both parents and students, parental perceptions regarding their role or ability, and mistrust or misunderstandings between parents and teachers. Moreover, a number of researchers have suggested that, even if such 'barriers' were to be removed, the conflicting interests of parents and teachers would place them in opposition. Seen from this perspective, inequalities and differences are inherent to parent-teacher relationships, making equal partnership based on shared goals an unlikely prospect.

Parent-teacher meetings

Within the field of parental involvement, there are relatively few studies relating directly to parent-teacher meetings, with no consistent theoretical approach. The findings which have emerged, however, consistently point to the problematic nature of parent-teacher meetings. Several researchers have noted that the practical realities of these events – seating arrangements, time constraints, lack of privacy – reinforce power differences between parents and teachers, limit the possibility for meaningful dialogue and often cause those involved to feel frustrated. These similarities seem particularly noteworthy given the considerable time span between studies and the different educational contexts in which they were set. It would thus appear that the

organisation of parent-teacher meetings has prevented or hindered the development of partnerships based on equality and meaningful dialogue. For those researchers or policy-makers working within the field of parental involvement, this would therefore be an area where intervention might have a significant impact on the quality of relationships between parents and teachers.

Parent-teacher relationships

With regard to the relationships between parents and teachers, there appears to be little consensus within the published research. Indeed, the studies I have reviewed reveal an incoherent picture, with findings to support a wide range of views being reported. Some researchers have provided evidence to suggest that parents and teachers work together to achieve common goals. However, such behaviour was related to the personal needs of the participants rather than student learning. By contrast, others have presented parents and teachers as opponents and have focused on the tensions between them. Seen from this perspective, partnerships based on mutual trust and equality would appear to be an unrealistic aim. Other researchers have pointed to power differences within parent-teacher relationships and have described how teachers, despite expressing support for the notions of shared responsibility and open dialogue, tended to control conversations. Finally, some researchers have noted the potentially damaging nature of parent-teacher talk and have described the steps taken by those involved to avoid causing one another harm.

Politeness theory

Of the various theoretical frameworks used by researchers to interpret parent-teacher conversations, politeness theory (Brown and Levinson, 1987) seems particularly useful. Whilst such an approach has been used by Pillet-Shore (2015, 2016), I would argue that the potential of politeness theory has not been fully explored. Goffman (1967) has suggested that all adults have a 'face' which they present to others. Brown and Levinson (1987) have proposed that protecting 'face' is an essential need for individuals in social situations and that face-threatening acts are an inevitable part of ordinary social interaction. Politeness can be defined as a speaker's attempt to reduce the impact of such threats, with individuals having a range of options – politeness strategies – that they can choose from. The strategies that individuals choose depend on a range of factors and may provide insights into the relationships between them. Brown and Levinson's theory has, however, been subjected to considerable criticism, particularly with regard to the question of whether or not it is universally applicable.

Implications for methodology

Throughout my review, I have critically considered a diverse range of theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches which have been helpful with regard to my own research design. Perhaps most significantly, several studies have highlighted how interviews with participants can provide useful insights into their thinking and the circumstances surrounding their

conversations. The interview responses of participants, however, did not always correspond with their actual talk during meetings, thus emphasising the need for direct recordings. Conversely, research based on recordings of actual parent-teacher conversations revealed aspects of participants' talk that they might not have been aware of or that they might not have wished to disclose during interview. However, research based only on recorded conversations lacked the detailed contextual information provided by those studies which utilised data from a range of sources. I will present my response to these issues in greater detail in the following chapter.

Chapter 3 – Methodology and Research Design

The methodological approaches adopted by the researchers involved in my literature review have proved useful in the design of my own study. I will now describe my methodology, as well as the reasons behind the choices I made.

In section 3.1, I outline the assumptions underlying my study and point out how these have influenced my research design. I also consider a fundamental problem associated with the constructionist philosophy I have adopted.

Section 3.2 describes the key features of case study research and explains why my study can be considered as such. I also respond to a common criticism levelled against this approach. In section 3.3, I provide details of the context within which my research took place, including the organisation of parent-teacher meetings and the nature of my school. Section 3.4 describes my sampling and data collection procedures. I also discuss my use of multiple data sources and explain why I chose to use unstructured (rather than semi-structured) interviews and audio (rather than video) recordings. In section 3.5, I describe my analytical approach and the practical steps involved in the analysis of my data. I also justify my decision to depart from the methodology of 'pure' conversation analysis. Section 3.6 is divided into two parts. In section 3.6.1, I examine the various ways in which triangulation can be understood and explain how the strategies I adopted have improved my study. In section 3.6.2, I focus on my personal limitations and potential for bias, and outline the reflexive strategies I chose to adopt. In section 3.7, I highlight the ethical

problems associated with my study and describe the measures I took to resolve them.

3.1 Philosophical Approach

Multiple realities

My research questions are concerned with the interactions that take place between parents and teachers when they meet (section 1.3). According to Ormston et al. (2013), social realities are jointly constructed by individuals when they interact. However, the complex and contingent nature of these interactions makes outcomes difficult to predict or reproduce. I did not, therefore, consider an approach based on the methods of the natural sciences – which seeks to isolate variables and identify deterministic relationships (Gagnon, 2010) – to be an appropriate way to address my research questions. Instead, I have adopted a social constructionist philosophy in which I assume that versions of reality are jointly constructed by people as they engage with one another during everyday social interaction (Hammersley, 2012). According to this approach, the nature of these realities varies according to the prior understandings and expectations of those involved, as well as the context within which interactions take place (Jorgensen and Phillips, 2002). Moreover, this process of knowledge construction is dynamic, with versions of the world being continually constructed and re-constructed as individuals interact (Hammersley, 2012). This is not to say that ‘anything goes’ since existing realities will place restrictions on the form that those interactions can

take (Jorgensen and Phillips, 2002). Regarding parent-teacher meetings, these restrictions arise because of the way in which meetings are organised (Walker, 1998) and the institutional roles of the participants (Matthiesen, 2015). I will now briefly explain how the notion of socially constructed reality has influenced my approach towards data collection.

Heritage (2004) has suggested that it is practicable to observe the process of reality construction taking place between individuals when they meet and talk, and that the understandings of those involved are rendered visible by the ways in which they respond to one another. In my study, I used audio recordings of actual parent-teacher conversations in order to gain access to this process (section 3.4.2). I also conducted one-to-one interviews with all those involved (section 3.4.3), during which participants often explained the meanings and motives behind their talk or presented alternative interpretations of conversations that caused me to question my own version of events. I would suggest however, that these interviews worked both ways since my transcripts and subsequent analysis may have caused participants to see their meetings in a different light. The versions of reality thus generated and the relationships between them are shown in figure 2. Seen in this way, I would suggest that my versions of the conversations I recorded were not produced in isolation, but jointly constructed by myself and the participants and embedded within a set of interconnected realities. Moreover, the fact that my thesis will be placed in the public domain will allow others to build on or challenge the way in which I have interpreted my data. My thesis might thus

be regarded as an intermediate point in an ongoing process of reality construction rather than as an end result in its own right.

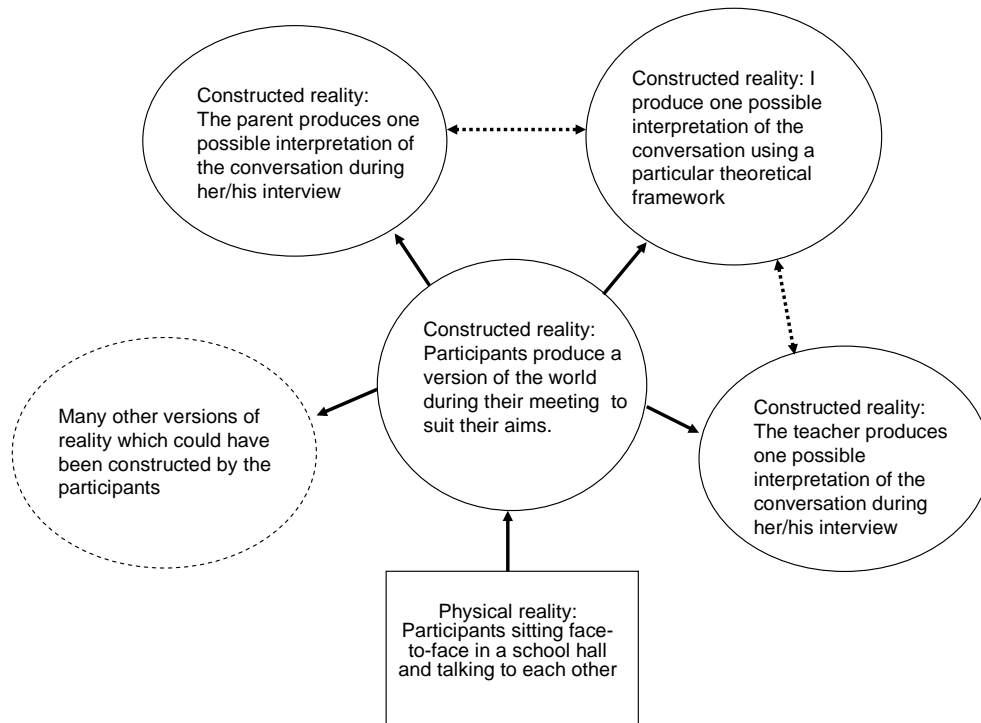


Figure 2: Multiple versions of reality

A different reality

My philosophical approach raises the epistemological problem of how I should treat the knowledge generated by my research. This is because social constructionism is based on the rejection of absolute knowledge, meaning that there is no single 'true' reality (Silverman, 2013). If my research practice is to be consistent with this philosophy, I must therefore acknowledge that, when interpreting my data, I am creating – not discovering – versions of reality. In principle, the findings I generate will be no better than any other form of knowledge; other interpretations – those put forward by the

participants themselves – cannot be rejected on the grounds that I have some special authority (Jorgensen and Phillips, 2002). I thus do not intend to privilege my own position as a researcher or suggest that I am the only one with the right to make knowledge claims. It could be argued that such an approach is both ethically preferable (Somekh, 2006) and likely to enhance the quality of my research findings (Macpherson and Tyson, 2008). In practice, however, I would argue that the knowledge I will generate through my research – being based on an explicitly stated methodology, supported by empirical evidence – will be unlike that generated by the participants. Whilst not privileging my position or dismissing alternative perspectives, this means that I can legitimately claim to be speaking with a different voice – one that deserves to be heard in any discussion regarding the way in which parents, students and teachers relate to one another.

3.2 Case Study Research

At the start of this chapter, I noted that my investigation could be described as a case study. According to Blatter (2008), however, there is no consensus on the essential characteristics of case study research, whilst Tight (2010) has pointed out that, though this term is widely used within the social sciences, its precise meaning is often not stated. I will therefore review the core features of this approach before going on to relate these to my own study.

The nature of case study research

Case study research is empirical inquiry (Gagnon, 2010; Woodside, 2010), often involving data collection from multiple sources (Houghton, 2013) and taking into account the differing perspectives of those involved (Hamilton, 2011). The fundamental idea is that a study should focus on some 'bounded unit' (Flyvbjerg, 2011, p.301), though there is flexibility in what this might be (Punch, 2005; Baxter and Jack, 2008). Punch (2005), for example, has suggested that a case could be an individual, a group, a role, an organisation, a community, a nation, a decision, a policy, a process, or an event. A second feature of case study research relates to the 'rich' nature of the data generated (Hamilton, 2011). Such evidence can be interpreted on different levels (Tight, 2010) and can provide insights into subtle or complex aspects of the phenomenon being investigated (Gagnon, 2010; Woodside, 2010). Case study research also rejects the reductionist approaches more usually associated with the natural sciences in which individual variables are controlled. Instead, each case is considered as an integrated whole made up of many components which interact in complex and unpredictable ways (Blatter, 2008; Gagnon, 2010). This might be seen as a disadvantage since it requires the researcher to forego control. However, it does allow for greater sensitivity and minimises researcher influence (Woodside, 2010). Finally, case study research recognises the importance of the context within which – and with which – individuals interact, with preference being given to the study of cases in their natural environment (Yin, 2003; Stake, 2005). By recognising the importance of participants' surroundings and circumstances, case studies

thus differ fundamentally from quantitative approaches in which more limited information is gathered from large numbers of participants (Gagnon, 2010).

My investigation as case study research

Having outlined the core features of case study research, I will now explain why my research can be considered in these terms. Firstly, my study was based on a clearly bounded unit of investigation (Flyvbjerg, 2011), this being the set of parent-teacher conversations I recorded at my school over two academic years. Whilst I could have selected alternative units, I chose to focus on conversations between parents and teachers since these had clear boundaries in terms of location, length and the people involved. Secondly, I recorded parent-teacher conversations in their natural setting (Stake, 2005) – see section 3.4.1 – and took steps to minimise my influence as a researcher – see section 3.6.2. This allowed me to capture features of participants' talk that might otherwise have gone undetected and generated detailed information which I was able to analyse on various levels (Hamilton, 2011). Indeed, Heritage (2004) has suggested that direct recordings are the only way to access the complex and subtle ways in which participants go about constructing their versions of reality – a point I will return to in section 3.4.2. My study also took into account the contexts of conversations – the physical surroundings, the organisation of meetings, the personal histories of the participants and wider school issues, thus enabling me to make inferences regarding participants' meanings and motives (Stake, 2005). Moreover, I recorded conversations over an extended period of time – see section 3.4,

each involving different participants with their own particular circumstances and conversational aims. Having classified my investigation as a case study, I would now like to address a common criticism made with regard to this approach.

Defending case study research

A number of researchers have pointed out that the findings generated through case study research are only relevant within a particular setting and cannot be applied to other contexts (Gomm, Hammersley and Foster, 2000; Tight, 2010). There are, however, a range of counter-arguments that can be made in response to this claim. Both Stake (2005) and Flyvbjerg (2011) have argued that the purpose of a case study is to describe the specific rather than the general, thus side-stepping the problem. Bassey (1999), however, has suggested that case study research can lead to tentative generalisations – as opposed to fixed universal laws – that may then provide a useful starting point for further research. This way of thinking seems particularly relevant to my study, given that one of my research aims was to generate findings which might stimulate others to investigate parent-teacher meetings (section 1.3). Others have pointed to the cumulative value of case studies, noting that several cases can provide a wider picture from which more general conclusions may be drawn (Woodside, 2010). Considering the lack of previously reported research which has focused on parent-teacher conversations (section 1.2), this argument again seems relevant to my investigation. Perhaps more importantly, some researchers have suggested

that the findings generated by case study research are transferable, and so can provide a substitute experience that others can transfer to situations with which they are familiar (Jensen, 2008; Houghton et al., 2013). My findings may thus resonate with the experiences of parents, teachers or researchers working in different educational institutions, and perhaps cause others to re-examine their own understandings or modify their view of parent-teacher meetings. Additionally, I would suggest that a case study has what Dadds (2007, p.279) has described as 'external empathetic validity', meaning that the findings thus generated carry the potential to facilitate mutual understanding and respect between those involved. Given the tensions and potential for conflict that have been reported in relation to parental involvement and parent-teacher meetings (sections 2.2.5 and 2.3.3), this could be considered as an important justification for using case study research to investigate parent-teacher meetings.

3.3 Research Context

Before going on to describe my data collection procedures, I would like to describe the key features of the context within which the parent-teacher conversations I recorded took place. I will first of all describe the school in which I conducted my research, whose character and recent history might be considered atypical. I will then consider the organisation of the parent-teacher meetings themselves since this may be unfamiliar to those from outside the English education system and can vary significantly from one school to another. This will help others not acquainted with my school to understand

how I interpreted my data and may also facilitate the transfer of my findings to other educational contexts.

The nature of my school

My research was conducted in a non-selective 11-16 secondary school located on the outskirts of a rural village in the north of England. This is a small school and forms a closely-knit community in which staff and students know one another well. Indeed, the school has built up a reputation for excellent care and support, particularly for less able students. The number of students receiving free school meals is below the national average and the ethnic make-up is predominantly White British. Whilst the school is independent of local authority control, it is financially supported by the Church of England and its ethos is strongly underpinned by Christian values. Leadership at the school is considered very strong, with the Headteacher being held in high regard by many staff and parents. GCSE exam results have been consistently above the national average for several years and the school was graded as 'good' according to its most recent Ofsted inspection¹.

In 2011, the school became an 'academy' – a school which receives its funding directly from central government rather than the local education authority (DfE, 2017). This decision was taken due to pressure on the school budget caused by steadily decreasing student numbers. The falling roll also

¹ I have chosen not to support this claim by including a reference to the relevant government inspection report or school performance data since this would **make it easier to identify** the school in which my research took place.

caused the school to introduce one-year examination courses in order to provide greater timetable flexibility and allow class sizes for certain subjects to be maintained at financially viable levels. The introduction of a national funding formula by the government in 2013 further weakened the school's financial position, thus placing the school under pressure to attract a higher proportion of students from within its catchment area. Consequently, the school has recently implemented marketing strategies aimed at local primary schools, though these have been relatively low-key so as not to provoke a similar response from larger, better-resourced schools in the neighbouring area.

The nature of parent-teacher meetings

Since parent-teacher meetings can take different forms, I will now outline the organisation of these events at my school. As for many other English secondary schools, parent-teacher meetings are held *en masse* in the main hall at the end of the school day – between 16:00 and 19:00. Five such events – which I will refer to as ‘parents’ evenings’ – are staged throughout the school year, with each being dedicated to the parents of students within one particular year group. The parents of year eleven students – fifteen to sixteen year-olds – for example, are invited to attend the event held in mid-October. A letter inviting parents to attend, together with an appointment sheet, is posted out to the relevant households two weeks beforehand, with students then expected to arrange meeting times on behalf of their parents. The evenings themselves consist of a series of face-to-face conversations, with parents

moving around the hall and teachers remaining seated at tables. Parents are almost always accompanied by their children and typically meet with eight to ten individual teachers during the course of an evening. For their part, teachers might see thirty or more sets of parents and children, though larger numbers are known. Each meeting has a time allocation of five minutes, though these often over-run, leading to a build-up of queues and a gradual abandonment of appointment times as the evening progresses. According to Walker (1998), such arrangements result in a hectic atmosphere, with parents feeling frustrated and teachers being obliged to 'rush' meetings in order to reduce waiting times.

3.4 Data Collection

In this section, I describe how I went about generating my data and justify the various decisions I made with regard to my research design. By making my methods and thinking as transparent as possible, I will enable others to critically assess the validity of my methods and the quality of my data (Lankshear and Knobel, 2004). Such an approach will also facilitate my attempts to become a more reflexive researcher, engaged in an on-going process of self-reflection and evaluation (section 3.6.2). I will retrospectively evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of my methodology in sections 7.1 and 7.2.

3.4.1 Sampling

Choice of strategy

Since studies based on the direct observation of parent-teacher meetings – see section 2.3 – are the most relevant to my research, I have taken these as my starting point when considering how to select parent-teacher conversations. It would appear that previous researchers have used a variety of strategies, depending on the aims and contexts of their investigations. Lemmer (2012), for example, used a ‘snowballing’ strategy in which parents were asked to suggest individuals to approach for subsequent interviews. Other researchers have used purposive sampling to identify those parents relevant to the focus of their investigation (Cheatham and Ostrosky, 2013; Matthiesen, 2015). By contrast, some researchers have used random selection to identify parents or parent-teacher meetings (Symeou, 2003; Weininger and Lareau, 2003; Inglis, 2014). I decided against using a ‘snowballing’ strategy since the parents initially involved would be likely to select others who they know and who have similar outlooks (Wilmot, 2005). This would introduce bias and limit diversity, meaning that some features of parent-teacher talk might appear overly important whilst others could be missed. Purposive sampling would generate a more diverse sample since I could select participants to ensure a wide range of demographic characteristics were studied. I would also be able to target parents and teachers where I wished to pursue interesting leads emerging from previous rounds of data collection (Curtis et al., 2000) or where there was the potential

for unusual patterns of talk that might shed light on more routine encounters (Hutchby and Wooffitt, 2002). However, purposive sampling could lead to a skewed sample due to my personal interests and opinions as a researcher – see section 3.6.2. By contrast, random selection would avoid bias and seems more in keeping with my inductive approach (section 1.3), though this strategy would be less efficient – some duplication would be likely – and also less flexible. Taking these considerations into account, I decided to adopt a sampling strategy based principally on the notion of random selection. I did purposively select a small number of conversations, however, in cases where potentially important data might otherwise have been overlooked.

Sampling procedure

I chose to record conversations at all five of the parents' evenings staged during the school year. This is because different issues may be important to the parents of children in different year groups. Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that the behaviour of parents – and therefore parent-teacher talk – changes as students move through the education system (Catsambis, 2001; Ferrara, 2009; Shumow, Lyutykh and Schmidt, 2011). I also decided to collect data over two consecutive academic years, meaning that recordings were made at parents' evenings dedicated to each year group twice. This provided me with useful information with regard to data saturation (Mason, 2010) and also allowed me to follow up unexpected or interesting patterns of talk by targeting the same participants over successive years. Since the nature of participants' talk could be influenced by the person having responsibility for

operating the recording device (MacLure and Walker, 2000), I decided that some conversations should be recorded by parents and others by teachers. Several weeks before each parents' evening event, I therefore randomly selected two parents and two teachers and contacted them – parents by telephone and teachers in person – to ask if they would be willing to participate in my study. This procedure was continued until two consenting parents and two consenting teachers had been identified². I then explained the background of my research and presented the potential participants with a consent form to be returned on the day of the meeting. For reasons relating to informed consent (David, Edwards and Alldred, 2001), students were approached separately to their parents by a non-teaching member of staff – see section 3.7. Having identified the principle participants (i.e. those actually recording the conversation) and obtained their consent, it was then necessary to select which conversations to record so that I could seek consent from those individuals who would also be involved. This was done using the appointment sheets issued by the school to students, with conversations being selected according to the order in which they appeared on this sheet. To allow for the possibility of operator error or cancelled appointments, I asked each participant to record two conversations, giving up to eight recordings for any given parents' evening.

² The large majority of parents I approached during the data collection phase of my study readily agreed to have their conversations recorded, though one parent declined since he was intending to discuss sensitive issues with the teacher concerned and another withdrew after being presented with my transcript of the conversation. Of the twenty-six members of staff I approached, one teacher declined to participate at the outset, a second failed to operate the recording device correctly, and a third withdrew consent after reading my transcript.

3.4.2 Direct Recordings

The value of direct recordings

I decided to base my investigation primarily on recordings of parent-teacher conversations – rather than interviews with participants staged after the event. This approach is in keeping with Mondada (2013, p.33), who has emphasised the importance of studying ‘naturally occurring activities as they ordinarily unfold’, as well as with the majority of the researchers whose work I reviewed in section 2.3 (MacLure and Walker; 2000; Symeou, 2003; Weininger and Lareau, 2003; Matthiesen, 2015; Pillet-Shore, 2012; 2015; 2016). Whilst I acknowledge that my science background may have predisposed me towards this approach, there are several reasons why recordings of conversations, as opposed to accounts by participants, should be considered as a particularly useful data source. Firstly, a number of researchers have noted that direct observation can reveal how participants relate to the context within which their actions take place (Hutchby and Wooffitt, 2002; Bryman, 2012). It has also been argued that participant observation carries the potential to reveal patterns of behaviour that could not have been anticipated beforehand (Mack et al., 2005) – in keeping with the exploratory nature of my research aims (section 1.3). Additionally, direct recordings can identify unconscious or taken-for-granted behaviours that would otherwise be inaccessible to the researcher. According to Hutchby and Wooffitt (2002), certain practices are difficult to detect through the accounts of participants since they are not themselves aware of their actions and so cannot articulate their views. Moreover, even if

the participants in my study had been aware of their behaviours, they may not have chosen to reveal their motives during an interview with a teacher at the school – a point I will return to when I consider the limitations of my study in section 7.1.

Audio versus video recordings

In deciding what data to collect for my study, I chose to generate audio – as opposed to audio-and-video – recordings of conversations. It could be argued that audio-and-video recordings might have been a better choice, since these would generate additional data relating to participants' gaze, body position, gestures, and facial expressions. Indeed, Pillet-Shore (2015, p.5-7) has shown that such non-verbal behaviour can provide insights into the meanings and motives behind parent-teacher talk that would not be possible from an analysis of their words alone. There are several reasons, however, why I chose audio-only recordings. Firstly, as I have previously noted, the nature of the parent-teacher talk which takes place could be influenced by the presence of the recording device. I would suggest that a small, unobtrusive digital voice recorder would have less impact on a conversation than a larger and more prominently-positioned video camera and could be operated by the participants themselves. This point is supported by Asan and Montague (2014) who have noted that the technical demands of video recording make it desirable for a camera operator to be present. Secondly, Mondada (2013) has pointed out that recording with a single camera means that it is difficult to get all of the participants into the same field of view. She noted that this could be

a source of bias, since the video recording would privilege the contribution of some participants at the expense of others. Also, a video recording in a crowded school hall would inevitably capture non-participating parents, students and teachers in the background, thus raising ethical issues regarding privacy. This would not be an issue with audio recordings since most digital voice recorders have a range of only a few metres, meaning that other conversations would not be discernible. Finally, the amount of data generated by video recordings could be very large (Wagner, 2011), making analysis more difficult and time-consuming. Indeed, this has been described as 'a truly daunting task' by Wooffitt (2005, p. 164). Since my research time is a finite resource, video recording would mean analysing fewer conversations, raising the possibility that some features of parent-teacher talk could be overlooked.

Problems with direct recordings

Several researchers have commented on the difficulties associated with the direct observation or recording of parent-teacher meetings (Walker, 1998; Weininger and Lareau, 2003; Markstrom, 2009; Inglis, 2012). I therefore decided to conduct trials at one parents' evening event prior to the main phase of my data collection. I will now outline two significant challenges I encountered, together with the solutions I adopted. Firstly, at a practical level, recording conversations in the hectic and noisy atmosphere of a crowded school hall meant that the sound quality of some conversations was very poor, made worse by floor vibrations being transmitted through the desk top on which the recording device was placed. I was able to render participants' talk

more audible, however, by using various software filters and by slowing down the playback speed at points where it was not clear exactly what is being said. Elastic bands wrapped around the recording device also reduced the effect of vibrations and greatly improved recording quality. The recordings of two conversations, however, were still difficult to discern since the parent, sitting in a wheelchair, was physically distant from the recording device. In these cases, I went back to the participants a few days after the meeting and re-played inaudible sections. This proved extremely useful and enabled me to transcribe almost all of the parent's talk. The second challenge I faced relates to the observer's paradox (Labov, 1972) – the idea that observing an event will alter its nature, meaning that naturally occurring talk cannot be recorded – and proved to be a more difficult problem to surmount. Indeed, Inglis (2012) decided against the direct observation of parent-teacher meetings for this reason. I addressed this problem by making sure that I was not present immediately before or during the conversations recorded, thus avoiding any direct influence I may have had. I also used digital recording devices that were small, unobtrusive and simple to operate, thus making it as easy as possible for participants to 'forget' the fact that they were under observation. I would argue that these steps reduced the effects of observation in my study, though I accept that completely natural recordings cannot be obtained without recourse to covert methods – an approach which would be ethically questionable (Pring, 2001).

3.4.3 Interviews

The case for interviews

As I noted in my review of the literature relating to parent-teacher meetings (section 2.3), various researchers have combined direct recordings of parent-teacher conversations with one-to-one interviews (Symeou, 2003; Weininger and Lareau, 2003; Markstrom, 2009; Tveit, 2009; Cheatham and Ostrosky, 2013; Matthiesen, 2015). This is the approach I chose to adopt for my investigation, my aim being to produce a detailed ‘backdrop’ to conversations that would provide insights into participants’ unstated meanings and motives (Bryman, 2012). Conducting follow-up interviews also gave the participants in my study the opportunity to comment on the accuracy of transcripts (Denscombe, 2010) and enabled me to cross-check factual statements made during parent-teacher conversations (O’Donoghue and Punch, 2003). Perhaps more importantly, these interviews allowed participants to present their own accounts of conversations, thus creating the potential for ‘divergent interpretations’ (Hammersley, 2008, p.26). In some cases, this challenged my understanding of their talk and caused me to re-examine my data. In others, the explanations offered by participants extended my thinking and enabled me to interpret their talk in ways that would not have occurred to me had I relied only on recordings – a point I will consider further in section 7.2. Additionally, it could be argued that providing participants with the opportunity to have their voices heard is ethically desirable (Somekh, 2006), and consistent with a philosophical approach – such as mine – based on the assumption of multiple

realities (Jorgensen and Phillips, 2002). I will return to my use of multiple data sources when I justify my decision to depart from the constraints of ‘pure’ conversation analysis – see section 3.5 – and also when I consider the potential benefits of triangulation – see section 3.6.1.

Unstructured interviews

I chose to use unstructured – as opposed to structured or semi-structured – interviews to generate supporting evidence for my investigation. According to Zhang and Wildermuth (2009), unstructured interviews are those in which the categories of questions are not set beforehand, but emerge through the social interaction between the researcher and respondent. The topics discussed will thus vary considerably, with questions emerging spontaneously and in unpredictable ways as the dialogue between researcher and participant unfolds. By contrast, semi-structured interviews are based on a series of predetermined questions, though they also allow for issues that the researcher sees as interesting or important to be pursued as the interview proceeds (Bryman, 2012). Structured (or standardised) interviews, however, are inflexible and involve asking each participant a set of identical questions (Turner, 2010). There were several reasons why I considered unstructured rather than semi-structured or structured interviews to be more suitable for my study. Firstly, this approach gives participants the freedom to introduce topics of their own, thus revealing the issues that they consider to be important and which might not have been anticipated beforehand (Zhang and Wildermuth, 2009). I would argue that such issues would be less likely to emerge during an

interview which begins with a series of questions compiled by the researcher. Secondly, participants may be more likely to speak openly and freely during unstructured interviews since they are less formal and more closely resemble ordinary conversation (Bryman, 2012). Indeed, unstructured interviews shift the balance of power towards participants (Klenke, 2008), meaning that they are less likely to feel threatened by the research setting. As I noted in the previous section, this is a particularly important consideration given my status as a teacher at the school in question. Additionally, Ryan, Coughlan and Cronin (2009) have suggested that the open-ended nature of unstructured interviews is useful when little is known about a topic – as in the case of parent-teacher conversations (section 1.2) – or where background information of a general nature is required – in keeping with my decision to combine direct recordings with interview data.

Problems with interviews

Whilst interviews may enhance my study in the ways outlined above, there are several reasons why I have chosen to give precedence to data generated from direct recordings. Firstly, interview data may be incomplete or incorrect due to the imperfect recollection of the participants (ten Have, 2007). This seems particularly likely with regard to my study since participants may have been involved in a large number of conversations – more than thirty for some teachers – during a given parents' evening. Secondly, participants can never have a completely free agenda during interviews since the questions posed will inevitably reflect the researcher's interests (Schegloff, 1997). This would

limit the topics on which participants can speak, meaning that the issues that they consider important may not be addressed. As I noted earlier, I took steps to reduce the risk of imposing my agenda on participants through the use of an informal interview style, though I accept that this danger cannot be completely removed. A further problem has been suggested by Cameron (2001), who has noted that participants may be reluctant to reveal their real motives, opinions or feelings during interviews since this might cast them in an unfavourable light. This would seem particularly pertinent to my study, given that the participants were aware that their relationship with me would continue beyond the completion of my research – a point I will return to in section 7.1. Additionally, Cameron (2001) has noted that coding procedures typically involve pulling interview statements out of their context and collecting these in separate analytical categories. This means that the analyst considers what was said away from the interactional context in which it occurred, thus raising the possibility that meanings could be distorted or misinterpreted. As a final point, I would add that data quality may be limited where participants feel inhibited by the formality of the setting. This seems particularly relevant to investigations such as mine which involve interviews with young children (David, Edwards and Alldred, 2001).

Interview procedures

Following each recorded conversation, I contacted all of the participants and requested permission to conduct a one-to-one interview. Since my aim was to conduct interviews as informally as possible, I invited participants to choose a

venue that would be convenient for them and where they would feel most comfortable. Most of the participants chose to be interviewed on the school premises, though some interviews with parents were conducted at their home or place of work. Where possible, I conducted interviews on two occasions subsequent to the parent-teacher meeting. The first of these was staged as soon as soon as I had transcribed the conversation – typically three to five days after the meeting had taken place – so as to capture participants' thoughts or feelings whilst these were still relatively fresh in their minds. During these interviews, I asked participants to comment on the accuracy of the transcript – which I presented to them at least one day before the interview – and to provide any background information that they felt to be relevant. As I noted earlier, this was to more fully understand the wider context within which conversations took place and to shed light on the motives of participants (Bryman, 2012). I also invited participants to describe how they felt about their meeting in general terms or – where appropriate – to elaborate on specific aspects of the conversation. The second interview was conducted on completion of my analysis and interpretation, typically one-to-two weeks after the parent-teacher meeting. Again, I presented a written copy to participants at least one day before the interview took place. During these second interviews, I offered participants the opportunity to comment critically on my understanding of their conversations or suggest alternative interpretations. As I have previously noted, this enabled me to identify misunderstandings or caused me to view conversations in different ways. At the end of this interview – in keeping with the ethical guidelines suggested by David, Edwards and Alldred (2001) – I also asked participants if they were still willing to be involved

in my research and reminded them that they were free to withdraw their consent at any point during the research process.

3.5 Data Analysis

Before going on to describe the nature of conversation analysis, I will justify my decision to adopt this analytical approach. According to Heritage (2011), conversation analysis is a particularly useful way to examine the talk which takes place in institutional settings – such as schools – in which the participants perform role-specific actions. Moreover, this analytical approach examines how individuals use language to accomplish practical social tasks and so relates directly to my research questions – see section 1.3 – regarding the aims of parents and teachers. Conversation analysis is also an inductive approach in which the analyst adopts a disinterested stance and rejects theoretical frameworks or preconceived ideas about what is important or likely to happen (ten Have, 2007). It is thus an appropriate method for the initial exploration of a research topic about which little is known or where there is no widely accepted theoretical framework, such as parent-teacher meetings. Additionally, conversation analysis is based on actual conversations as they naturally occur – as opposed to talk staged by the researcher – and places the focus on ordinary social events (Hutchby and Wooffitt, 2002, p.13-15). Since I have investigated parent-teacher conversations in their natural setting, conversation analysis is therefore an appropriate way to analyse my data.

The principles of conversation analysis

Conversation analysis can trace its origins back to ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1984), which is concerned with what people say and do during their everyday lives so as to make sense of their world and generate order. It is, however, an interdisciplinary approach, and draws from linguistics, sociology, anthropology, pragmatics and psychology (Hutchby and Wooffitt, 2002, p.36). According to Hutchby and Wooffitt, conversation analysis is based on a number of underlying assumptions. First, it is assumed that talk is used by participants as a means to achieve their goals. People are not merely exchanging information when they talk, they are performing actions such as complaining or constructing identities. As I have already noted, this relates directly to my research questions regarding the conversational aims of parents and teachers (section 1.3). Second, sequences of talk are orderly and form recognisable structures, with participants selecting from a range of generally applicable and commonly – though not necessarily explicitly – understood conversational strategies so as to achieve their interactional goals. Conversation analysis is thus concerned with how participants achieve their goals, again linking directly to my research questions. Third, mutually agreed understandings between participants (intersubjective realities) are created and maintained during face-to-face talk, giving insights into what participants are thinking as a conversation unfolds. This is particularly important for my study since parents might have been reluctant to reveal their thoughts to a researcher who was also their children's teacher – see section 3.4. Additionally, Heritage (2011) points out that, when participants respond to an

utterance, they usually address themselves to the preceding turn. They also signal that some type of response is expected, thus influencing the talk of the next speaker. Conversation analysis therefore provides an alternative notion of context – what has just been said – making it a useful tool in the analysis of parent-teacher meetings during my investigation.

The advantages of conversation analysis

As I pointed out at the start of this section, conversation analysis offers several significant advantages which persuaded me to adopt this analytical approach. I will now consider these in greater detail. Firstly, the process of mechanically recording and transcribing conversations distances the researcher from the familiar, thus rendering visible aspects of conversations that might otherwise be taken for granted (ten Have, 2007). With regard to my investigation, this was important since I was immersed in the context of my study and so less likely to see how conversations could have been constructed differently – see section 3.6.2. Moreover, I was able to compare the transcripts generated during my study with those produced in alternative institutional settings, namely doctor-patient interactions (Stivers, 2006; Pilnick, Hindmarsh and Gill, 2009) and service encounters (Garzaniti, Pearce and Stanton, 2011; Lind and Salomonson, 2012), thus enabling me to ‘step outside’ and see my data from an alternative perspective. Conversation analysis also considers the organisation of talk from the perspective of the participants themselves, in particular how they understand and respond to one another as sequences of talk unfold. Such an approach thus restricts the

interpretations that can be made and so reduces the potential for researcher bias (Schegloff, 1997) – particularly useful in relation to my study owing to my status as an ‘insider’ researcher (section 3.4.2). A further advantage of conversation analysis is that it gives access to the thinking of participants in a way that would not be possible through analytical methods based on questionnaire data or interview responses. According to Heritage (2011), participants display their interpretation of the previous utterance when they respond, which is then confirmed or repaired by the original speaker during the subsequent turn. Participants thus demonstrate the meaning of their talk to the analyst, as well to one another. The capacity for conversation analysis to reveal unstated meanings and understandings in this way is important, given that participants may not be conscious of their actions or willing to openly state their aims (section 3.4.3).

Disagreement within the field

I would now like to consider two critical objections to conversation analysis (Wetherell, 1998; Billig, 1999) that seem relevant to my study and which have caused me to reject the ‘pure’ version of this analytical approach. These were raised in response to Schegloff (1997), a founder conversation analysis researcher, who has pointed out that there are any number of theories or contexts to choose from when analysing talk. He argued that analytical approaches based on *a priori* theory or taking wider contexts into account will lead to interpretations which reflect the analyst’s preferences as opposed to the issues that were relevant to the participants during their conversation. I will

now consider the counter-arguments provoked by Schegloff, before going on to explain how these various points of view have shaped my methodology.

The first objection revolves around the narrow focus of conversation analysis on micro-level interactional detail:

The problem with conversational analysts is that they rarely raise their eyes from the next turn in the conversation, and, further, this is not an entire conversation or sizeable slice of social life but usually a tiny fragment

Wetherell, 1998, p.408

Conversation analysis thus fails to provide a complete understanding of the talk which takes place between individuals since it disconnects the analyst from the broader – potentially relevant – political and social contexts within which conversations take place. She added that to fully explain what participants are doing with their talk it would be necessary to explore the wider discourses which influence their talk. Furthermore, she pointed out that language is not a neutral tool, but inevitably calls upon the understandings embedded in the shared history and culture of those involved. Words are thus loaded with meanings which cannot necessarily be inferred from the immediate interactional context. Wetherell suggested that conversation analysis studies should be complemented and informed by the wider contexts within which conversations take place and that Schegloff's technical analysis

would be incomplete unless it took these into account. Maynard (2006) has responded to Wetherell by echoing Schegloff's original argument. He pointed out that there is no systematic way of connecting the details of a particular stretch of talk to the wider context in which it occurs – no way to decide what to include from beyond the immediate interactional setting. He also noted that, by invoking wider contexts, the analyst may lose sight of those aspects of the talk that the participants themselves regard as important.

The second objection is based on the notion that conversation analysis takes no account of the confrontational nature of many social interactions:

[Conversation analysis] might be problematic if straightforwardly applied to episodes in which power is directly, overtly and even brutally exercised ... Attention to what abuser and victim share in common, in terms of the organization of talk, would seem to miss the point.

Billig, 1999, pp.554-555

Billig thus called attention to the limitations of approaches based only on the technical aspects of sequential organisation and turn-taking without taking into account the way in which power and ideological positions are reflected in everyday conversations. He pointed out that conversation analysis tacitly assumes a social order in which participants have equal status, and also called into question its purportedly neutral ideological stance. He also noted that conversation analysis takes an unrealistically optimistic view of social

interaction and fails to notice oppression or disadvantage based on class, ethnicity and gender. Billig illustrated his argument by invoking the powerful and disturbing example of how conversation analysis would treat the talk taking place during a violent rape. He thus presented this approach as naïve and impotent, with little to say regarding issues that may be of utmost importance to the individuals concerned. Schegloff responded to this criticism by pointing out that even episodes of violence or brutal acts of oppression consist of exchanges in which individuals act in accordance with the rules of ordinary conversation and that conversation analysis could provide useful insights into the nature and origin of such events (Schegloff, 1999).

Given these objections, I did not consider conversation analysis alone to be sufficient to address my research questions. My own experience as a teacher at the school in question suggested that parent-teacher conversations are shaped by a variety of contextual factors, such as the age of the student or previous encounters with parents. Moreover, the asymmetrical nature of parent-teacher relationships (section 2.2.5) means that power differences are also likely to influence the talk which takes place. Schegloff's solution to the critical points made by Wetherell and by Billig was to suggest analysing data in two stages: a 'technical' analysis based on conversation analysis and utilising only transcript evidence, followed by a 'situated' analysis in which theoretical considerations and wider contexts are taken into account (Schegloff, 1997). With regard to parent-teacher conversations, the studies conducted by Cheatham and Ostrosky (2011 and 2013) show that this division of labour can work well in practice – see section 2.3.4. They utilised

conversation analysis to generate detailed insights into parent-teacher behaviour, but then broadened the scope of their investigation to show how wider cultural and linguistic factors influenced the talk which took place. An approach in which other forms of evidence are used to complement conversation analysis is also supported by Maynard (2006). He argued that a 'limited affinity' between conversation analysis and ethnography can enhance an investigation by providing descriptions of settings and individuals, clarifying technical language or context-specific courses of action, and shedding light on 'interesting' patterns of talk unearthed – but not explained by – a technical analysis of the transcript. I have therefore chosen to depart from the methodology of 'pure' conversation analysis and adopt Schegloff's two-part approach to data analysis. For the reasons outlined in section 3.4.3, however, I decided to give precedence to direct recordings of parent-teacher conversations and treat interview data as supporting evidence.

Transcription

I transcribed conversations between parents, students and teachers using a simplified version of the Jefferson system widely used in studies using conversation analysis (e.g. Wetherell, 1998). This provides the analyst with very detailed information regarding participants' talk and is based on the assumption that 'no order of detail in interaction can be dismissed *a priori* as disorderly, accidental, or irrelevant' (Heritage, 1984, p.241). There are two features of Jefferson's system that distinguish it from methods of transcription used elsewhere in social science research (Hepburn and Bolden, 2013).

Firstly, talk is represented exactly as it sounds, as opposed to what the analyst thinks a participant might have intended to say. The words 'yeh' and 'yeah', for example, would be transcribed as such, and not recorded as 'yes'. Repetition, laughter, and non-lexical utterances such as 'erm' are also included, however irrelevant these conversational features may seem. Secondly, the Jefferson system emphasises timing and sequential organisation – where a given utterance fits within a sequence of talk. For example, the length of pauses, speed of delivery, turn transition points – when a different speaker has the opportunity to speak – and overlapping talk are all clearly indicated. Whilst being less easy to read, the Jefferson system thus provides much more detailed information than orthographic transcription in which participants' speech is represented using standard English. According to Hepburn and Bolden (2013), these details are important since they show how participants perform a wide variety of actions. It also places the emphasis on how participants construct their talk in order to achieve their conversational goals rather than the content of what they say. Jefferson's transcription system will thus allow me to address my research questions relating to the aims of participants (section 1.3).

According to Antaki (2011), an audio recording of a conversation contains far more information than could be represented by a transcript, thus creating a dilemma for the analyst. On the one hand, transcripts should be detailed enough to facilitate the identification and description of conversational features that the participants themselves treat as relevant. As I have already noted, simple orthographic transcription does not meet this requirement since it

removes much potentially significant information relating to coordination and timing (Hepburn and Bolden, 2013). On the other hand, transcripts should be simple enough to be understood by readers who may be unfamiliar with the standard conventions of a given discipline. A transcription system based on phonetics, for example, would include very detailed information about the form of participants' talk but would not necessarily be 'accessible to linguistically unsophisticated readers' (Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson, 1974, p.734). This is relevant to my research given that I asked participants to check the accuracy of transcripts during their follow-up interviews – see section 3.4.3. Moreover, it was not possible to produce and analyse very detailed transcripts of all the conversations I recorded within the timescale of my study. I therefore chose to adopt the simplified transcription system used by Wetherell (1998), my aim being to balance the detail necessary to detect important features of participants' talk against the clarity and ease-of-use required for practical analysis and interpretation (Antaki, 2011). This approach enabled me to transcribe a larger number of conversations across a wider range of contexts, and so capture features of parent-teacher talk that I might otherwise have missed.

Analysis of transcripts

In order to allow sufficient time for detailed analysis within the planned timescale of my research, I randomly selected twenty conversations, two from each parents' evening event. I then conducted my 'technical' analysis according to the guidelines proposed by Heritage (2011), and taking the

studies conducted by Pillet-Shore (e.g. 2012) as illustrative examples.

Heritage suggested analysing participants' talk at four different levels – overall conversational structure, sequential organisation, turn design, and lexical choice – each focusing on successively smaller units of talk. I will now expand on these terms and describe the analytical procedures involved at each level.

(i) Overall structural organisation

In contrast to ordinary conversation, institutional talk often has a recognisable structure which consists of components – each having a distinct purpose – and typically occurring in a certain order (Heritage, 2011). In my study, I identified these sequences by colour coding stretches of talk according to the activity that participants appeared to be undertaking. Whilst this provided only limited information about the way in which participants constructed their talk, it did familiarise me with the content of conversations and divided transcripts into smaller, more manageable units for subsequent analysis. I then went through each colour-coded block line-by-line to identify the conversational 'practices' (Heritage, 2004, p.6) used by the participants, that is to say, those features of talk which have a recognisable form, occupy specific locations within a sequence, or perform a specific action. These were used as the starting point for subsequent analysis.

(ii) Sequence organisation

A fundamental assumption in conversation analysis is that conversation is sequentially organised. In other words, the meaning of a given utterance depends on its location within a given sequence of talk. Answers follow questions, for example, which in turn may be followed by news receipts, acknowledgements or challenges (Heritage, 2004). By considering the position of utterances within the conversations I recorded, I was thus able to identify the actions that the participants were attempting to perform. Moreover, the relationship between turns creates normative expectations, meaning that, on completing their turns, participants will anticipate a certain type of response. If this is not forthcoming then a negative sanction – such as an expression of disapproval – may follow (Hutchby and Wooffitt, 2002). The interactional context – what is said immediately before and after an utterance – thus enables the analyst to understand its meaning (Stivers, 2013). Again, this enabled me to establish what the parents and teachers in my study were attempting to achieve with their talk.

(iii) Turn design

Analysis at the level of turn design involves examining the content of individual turns and how they are constructed so as to achieve some action (Drew, 2013). A key principle is that participants modify the design of their turns according to the recipient. This gives insights into how they perceive one another and the identities that they wish to establish (Heritage, 2004). The

work that goes into turn design is made particularly clear when participants undertake self-repair (Kitzinger, 2013), in other words changing an utterance part way through so as to perform an action in a more appropriate way. When this occurs, it is usually possible to see what the speaker was about to say and what they chose to say instead, thus revealing their unconscious thinking as they constructed the turn. Such instances are important in the analysis of parent-teacher meetings since the intentions of participants are not always openly stated (Tveit, 2009).

(iv) Lexical Choice

According to Heritage (2011), the individual words selected by a participant can be used to indicate their stance with regard to the issue being discussed, reflect who is being addressed, or avoid confrontation. Switching pronouns from 'we' to 'they', for example, might occur when speakers wish to distance themselves from another group (Cohen, 2008). Moreover, the same word may be used to perform different actions in alternative contexts, and inferences can be made when participants pass the opportunity to produce a lexical response. Accepting a compliment without appearing unduly boastful, for example, might be achieved by responding to a compliment with laughter rather than words (Pillet-Shore, 2012). Lexical choice may be a particularly important issue for the participants in parent-teacher meetings given their exposure to criticism (MacLure and Walker, 2000) and their concern to avoid causing one another harm (Tveit, 2009).

Analysis of interviews

The second part of my data analysis – Schegloff's (1997) 'situated' analysis – was based mainly on interview responses from parents, students and teachers, though I also drew on other sources of evidence such as school reports or attendance records when I felt that these would be useful. My aim during this stage was to gain insights into the meanings and motives behind participants' talk which could not have been accessed through a 'technical' analysis of transcripts alone (Maynard, 2006).

I analysed transcripts in accordance with the procedures for thematic analysis suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006), using the practical examples reported by Nowell et al. (2017). Thematic analysis is a flexible approach which involves identifying themes within a given data set and seeking common threads, relationships, or overarching patterns (Lapadat, 2010). Whilst emphasising the need for flexibility, Braun and Clarke (2006) have described the process in six stages: familiarisation with the data; generation of codes; searching for themes; reviewing themes; defining and naming themes; and producing a written report. They also suggested that thematic analysis can be used inductively or deductively. An inductive approach does not start with a pre-existing coding frame and disregards *a priori* theory, though it is acknowledged that researchers cannot entirely free themselves from their preconceptions. By contrast, deductive thematic analysis uses a particular theory to generate a coding framework, within which 'chunks' of data can then be placed. Since the aim of my study was to explore parent-teacher

conversations with an open-mind, I had originally intended to adopt a purely inductive approach to my analysis of interview data. However, my 'technical' analysis of parent-teacher conversations had already generated a closely related coding framework and was likely to influence the way in which I viewed participants' interview responses. I therefore decided to adopt a hybrid approach to thematic analysis (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006) in which I utilised an *a priori* coding framework, followed by a data-driven inductive analysis.

In practice, I produced verbatim transcripts of interviews in standard orthographic form – as for those researchers whose work I reviewed in section 2.3 (Walker, 1998; Symeou, 2003; Tveit, 2007; Lemmer, 2012). I did not use the more detailed Jefferson system of transcription (Appendix B) at this stage since I was primarily interested in the content of interviews rather than how participants constructed their talk. I then placed 'chunks' of data from interview transcripts into the categories which had emerged from my previous analysis of conversations, but adding or modifying codes when participants raised issues which I had not previously encountered. After going through this procedure for all of the interview transcripts relating to a particular parent-teacher conversation, I produced a summary of the views expressed by the participants in relation to each analytical category. I then considered these in relation to my own interpretation of the conversation, focusing in particular on areas where differing views were apparent. Finally, I viewed the data set as a whole and considered those themes which were common across conversations. My coding of interview data was thus influenced by my

'technical' analysis and could not be considered as a purely inductive approach in which the researcher disregards previous knowledge (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006). I would argue that this combined the advantages of both approaches. On the one hand, the categories generated by my previous analysis sensitised me to particular themes, thus enabling me to 'see' participants' responses in a different light. On the other, my inductive analysis of the interview data generated unanticipated insights, thus causing me to refine my coding framework. I would add that, whilst I have described my analysis of interview data as a linear procedure, this was in fact an iterative process which involved moving backwards and forwards between my transcript data and coding frameworks.

3.6 Research Quality

In this section, I will consider how triangulation and reflexivity have helped me to enhance the quality of my research. I will first of all describe three different ways in which triangulation can be viewed and judge their significance with regard to my study, before going on to challenge the claim that methods of triangulation based on different philosophical premises should not be combined. I will then consider how my personal limitations and potential for bias might have influenced my findings and outline the strategies that I adopted in my efforts to become a more reflexive researcher.

3.6.1 Triangulation

Corroboration of data

Triangulation can be used to cross-reference evidence from independent, multiple sources so as to enhance data validity (O'Donoghue and Punch, 2003). In my study, I did this in several ways. Firstly, I checked any factual statements made by participants during their parent-teacher conversation against data from written reports or school records of attendance. My thinking was that, by revealing contradictions or inaccuracies, I would gain insights into what the participants were attempting to achieve by constructing their talk in certain ways. Secondly, I presented each participant with transcripts of their parent-teacher conversation and invited them to state whether this accurately represented their talk – see section 3.4.3. In most cases, however, these measures were not particularly useful. The factual statements made by participants that could be cross-checked were invariably correct. Moreover, participants rarely contested transcripts and when they did so they tended to focus on relatively minor points that had little bearing on my subsequent interpretation. In one case, however, the teacher produced a modified transcript in which he had removed any features of his talk that might have cast him in an unfavourable light, thus raising a problem relating to respondent validation that has been noted by others (Sandelowski, 2008). Whilst I did not use this 'improved' version during my subsequent analysis and interpretation, I regarded the fact that this teacher had felt the need to alter the transcript in this way as useful information in its own right.

Triangulation as illumination

The term triangulation can also be used to describe the way in which various sources of evidence are used to illuminate an aspect of the social world from different angles (Altrichter et al., 2008). This differs from the form of triangulation outlined above since it is concerned with the generation of new information rather than cross-checking existing data. Triangulation in this sense is important since audio recordings alone cannot capture all aspects of the interactions between participants (Mondada, 2013), nor can they provide information relating to the wider contexts within which conversations take place (Wetherell, 1998). Indeed, my experience as a teacher at the school in question tells me that the circumstances surrounding parent-teacher conversations can significantly alter the nature of the talk which takes place. I have spoken more cautiously than usual, for example, when meeting parents who have gained a reputation for confrontation or with whom I have had difficult encounters on previous occasions. I therefore chose to depart from 'pure' conversation analysis – see section 3.5 – and utilise interview data to assist me when analysing and interpreting transcripts of parent-teacher conversations. In doing so, my aim was to bring to light contextual factors which were relevant to the participants but could not be accessed from transcripts, thus allowing me to account for features of talk that I would otherwise have been unable to explain (Maynard, 2006).

Seeking divergence

There is a third version of triangulation relevant to my study, whereby evidence from multiple sources is considered as a way of generating alternative interpretations rather than as a way to check the validity of data or shed light on a given phenomenon (Hammersley, 2008). Triangulation in this sense differs fundamentally from the previous two approaches since it does not assume a single version of reality. Rather than converging on a single interpretation, this form of triangulation utilises a variety of data sources so as to call attention to alternative perspectives or challenge existing views (Lankshear and Knobel, 2004). In my study, this form of triangulation was facilitated through my use of informal interviews, during which the participants produced alternative accounts of their conversations. Such an approach seems particularly appropriate for my study given the constructionist premises – the assumption of multiple realities constructed through social interaction – on which it is based (section 3.1). Moreover, these divergent views stimulated my thinking in ways that I could not have anticipated, thus widening my understanding and enhancing my ability to interpret parent-teacher conversations. I would also argue that the presentation of participants' accounts alongside my own may act to counter researcher bias and so result in a more balanced thesis argument. Perhaps most importantly, I would suggest that this type of triangulation is desirable from an ethical perspective since it shows respect for the views of participants and allows them to have their voices heard (Somekh, 2006).

A philosophical objection

It has been argued that methods of triangulation based on different philosophical assumptions cannot be legitimately combined and that researchers should operate within a single philosophical framework (Maxwell and Delaney, 2004; Guba and Lincoln, 2005). Hammersley (2008), however, has suggested that juxtaposing data produced using different methods can produce tensions or raise questions that might otherwise not be considered. He has also challenged whether or not sources of data that have been generated through different methods really do involve conflicting ontological or epistemological assumptions. Such thinking is supported by Johnson, Onwuegbuzie and Turner (2007), who have suggested that the research questions – not the epistemological position of the researcher – should determine the methods chosen and that linking particular strategies with a given research paradigm is neither necessary nor helpful. In accordance with Hammersley (2008), I therefore chose to combine data generated from the analysis of naturally occurring conversations with evidence from one-to-one interviews – see section 3.4.3. In doing so, my aim was to draw together different sources of evidence which would not only illuminate my understanding of conversations but also generate alternative versions of reality. On reflection, I would argue that this extended my thinking and enhanced my ability to interpret conversations – a point I will return to in section 7.2 when I review my methodology.

3.6.2 Reflexivity

The importance of reflexivity

In keeping with the constructionist principles on which I based my investigation, I accept that I am central to the generation of new knowledge and cannot remove myself from the research process (Jorgensen and Phillips, 2002). This is significant since choices based on my values and predispositions will have been made at every stage of my investigation (Sandelowski, 2011). Transcripts, for example, cannot represent every detail of recorded conversations (Antaki, 2011), thus requiring me to be selective. It could thus be argued that the features of parent-teacher talk that I did choose to transcribe might have influenced the way in which I interpreted conversations. Moreover, my interests and preferred theories will have sensitised me to detect only some features of talk or to interpret data in certain ways (Houghton et al., 2013). Indeed, as I noted in section 3.4.2, my familiarity with the school and the personal characteristics, histories and circumstances of the participants, whilst providing certain advantages – see section 7.1, will have made me particularly prone to bias and less likely to identify taken-for-granted understandings (ten Have, 2007). I would thus suggest that my part in the research process will place restrictions on the claims that I can make, making a reflexive approach in which I attempt to identify, acknowledge and address the limitations of my study particularly important. I will now outline the practical steps I took in my attempt to become

a more reflexive researcher. I will consider how effective – or not – these strategies were in section 7.1.

Reflexivity in practice

I selected four strategies which were designed to raise my awareness of the ways in which I influenced the research process. The first of these was carried out at an early stage in my study and involved reflecting and writing about myself. Specifically, those values, beliefs and experiences that might have affected the way I collected, analysed and interpreted my data (Walker, Read and Priest, 2013). This writing was difficult to produce since it forced me to confront episodes of my life and aspects of my personality that I would rather have left undisturbed, though it did prove to be revealing and gave me a sense of release. Perhaps more importantly, this strategy made me more aware of my personal limitations and prejudices than would have been the case had I not brought these aspects of myself into the open.

My second strategy involved conducting ‘outsider audits’ (Lankshear and Knobel, 2004), in which I asked a number of teachers and researchers not directly connected with my investigation to review and critically evaluate my methods and interpretations, or to suggest ways in which I might improve the quality of my study. This involved presenting my research at several events staged by my university, as well as providing in-service training sessions for the teachers at my school – see Appendix A. I also engaged in e-mail correspondence with researchers having expertise in parent-teacher

meetings, and received useful feedback from the reviewers and editor of *School Community Journal* – see section 7.1. I would argue that these steps allowed me to correct for oversights or bias that would not have been visible to me through personal introspection alone.

As a further reflexive strategy, I have made the decision-making process as transparent as possible in this chapter by stating the values, assumptions and arguments on which my choices were based (e.g. section 3.4.2). On reflection, I would suggest that this has improved the quality of my research by causing me to critically consider the reasons behind my decisions, thus enabling me to identify areas where personal bias may have influenced my thinking (Ryan and Golden, 2006). Making my reasoning explicit will also allow others to judge for themselves the suitability of my research methods and the validity of my findings, thus enhancing the credibility of my investigation (Patton, 2002; Lankshear and Knobel, 2004). For these reasons, I will adopt a similar approach in chapters four and five when I communicate and then discuss my research findings.

My final strategy was based on the notion of a reflective diary to record the ways in which I might have personally influenced the research process (Houghton et al., 2013). I decided to modify this approach, however, since I found it difficult to produce such writing at pre-set times and could not be sure that my recollection was accurate. I therefore recorded my thoughts and feelings in the form of ‘notes to self’ as and when they occurred during my investigation. This meant that my comments were spontaneous and recorded

whilst still fresh in my mind. I also routinely closed each writing session with a brief summary of my thinking, thus maintaining a reflexive 'thread' from one writing session to the next. I would point out, however, that these measures tended to become neglected as deadlines approached.

3.7 Ethics

I was given clearance to proceed with my research by the University of Cumbria's Ethics Advisory Panel in October 2013. In this section, I will consider the ethical problems highlighted by the panel, as well as a further difficulty that I considered relevant to my study. I will also outline the steps I took to address these problems and make explicit the ethical principles on which my decisions were based. Pring (2001) has argued that there may be no satisfactory answers to ethical problems where conflict between different principles occurs. I would argue, however, that the strategies I adopted during my investigation significantly reduced the potential for my research to cause harm and were the most appropriate strategies for the particular circumstances of my study.

Confidentiality and anonymity

As I have already noted – see section 3.3, my research was conducted at a small school serving a relatively isolated rural community. Given that my findings will be placed in the public domain and that it would be possible to identify my school, there is a risk that someone reading my thesis might also

be able to identify the participants. Indeed, Malone (2003) has suggested that it is impossible to fully protect the anonymity of individuals when conducting research within one's own workplace setting. According to Pring (2001), individuals may be harmed were their anonymity to become compromised or confidential information be passed on to others, whilst Ogden (2008) has pointed out that participants may respond more candidly if they feel that their identity will not be revealed. To reduce the likelihood of participants being identified, and in keeping with those researchers I reviewed in section 2.3, I avoided the use of participants' names throughout my thesis and omitted any details such as place names which might have allowed individuals to be recognised. This was particularly important for subjects taught by only one member of staff since the teacher concerned could be positively identified. When presenting excerpts from these conversations, I therefore made minor changes to transcripts so as to disguise the subject area. With regard to confidentiality, I treated all data relating to participants as private and took steps to ensure that information was held securely and could not be accessed by others (BERA, 2014). In practice, this meant that all electronic data was password protected and hard copies of research material were stored in a single, secure location. To reassure those involved in my study, I also communicated these steps to them when I explained my research and made it clear that any personal data relating to participants would be destroyed or deleted at the end of my investigation.

Informed consent

For any research involving people, fully informed consent may be better considered as a goal to work towards rather than something that can be achieved in an entirely satisfactory way (Wiles et al., 2005). There are two fundamental difficulties involved, and I will consider these separately. The first problem is that the participants are unlikely to have had any previous experience of educational research, raising questions regarding how well-informed they could be at the outset (Malone, 2003). In my study, I addressed this problem by explaining the nature of my research to participants when I made my initial request and giving them the opportunity to ask questions. I also provided participants with a background information sheet and consent form, both of which included my e-mail address and an invitation to contact me should they have any further questions. Additionally, they were given the opportunity to ask further questions when I met them just before the parent-teacher meeting and also at the start of each interview.

A second – and perhaps more difficult – problem relates to whether informed consent can ever be freely given. My research was carried out within a school setting, with its associated power differences and normative expectations (David, Edwards and Alldred, 2001). This means that the parents and students I approached may have felt under pressure to participate. The teachers involved in my study were also my co-workers, many of whom I have supported on previous occasions. They might thus have felt obliged to participate in order to reciprocate past favours (Nowak, 2012). In my study, I

adopted a number of strategies which were designed to reduce these pressures, though I accept that they cannot be completely eliminated (Malone, 2003). Firstly, my sampling procedure – see section 3.4.1 – required me to contact potential participants at least several days before their parent-teacher meeting. This introduced ‘thinking time’ between my initial request and the point at which they formally agreed to participate and meant that they were not obliged to sign the consent form in my presence. Secondly, just before meetings and interviews took place, I asked participants if they were still willing to be involved in my research and reminded them that they were free to withdraw their consent at any time. Additionally, I presented transcripts of the relevant parent-teacher conversation to all those involved – see section 3.4.3 – and requested permission to proceed with my analysis. In practice, this resulted in two conversations being discarded after participants withdrew their consent. Whilst this was unsatisfactory from the point of view of data loss, it did maintain trust and protect the interests of those concerned. Moreover, my commitment to respecting the wishes of these individuals may have led to better quality data in the long term by encouraging others to be more forthright during their interviews.

It could be argued that obtaining informed consent from young children is particularly difficult since they may not have the capacity to make reasoned decisions based on the information presented to them (Soffer and Ben-Arieh, 2013). Moreover, the subordinate status and consequent lack of power of children within schools raises questions regarding their freedom of choice (David, Edwards and Alldred, 2001). I would add that students may not

necessarily make a distinction between research activities – in which their involvement is voluntary – and the compulsory aspects of their everyday school life. With regard to my investigation, I therefore decided to ask a non-teaching member of staff – a science technician – to approach those students whose parents had agreed to be involved. In doing so, my aim was to request consent from students away from the direct influence of teachers or parents, thus reducing any pressure that they may have felt under to participate. I also asked the technician concerned to contact students outside of ordinary lesson time, thus distancing my research from students' classroom learning. Additionally, I provided students with a simpler, easier-to-read version of the background information sheet where I felt this to be appropriate, my aim being to ensure that those with weaker literacy skills would still be able to read and digest the relevant information.

Conflicts of interest

A further ethical difficulty arises where the possible outcomes of research could conflict with the interests of participants (Hammersley and Traianou, 2012). Whilst my primary research aim was simply to explore an aspect of my professional life about which little is currently known (section 1.3), I recognise that my study may also lead to changes in professional practice or school policy that could materially affect the lives of others. Moreover, the participants in my study will have had different or even conflicting needs, meaning that changes which favour certain groups may have been detrimental to others. My research could thus have consequences for individuals, some of whom may

have had no previous connection with my research, that they would not necessarily welcome. In response to this problem, I took steps to offset any possible disadvantages to participants and others by providing worthwhile benefits. This is in keeping with the concept of reciprocity, whereby the researcher exchanges something useful in return for participants' time and trust (Lankshear and Knobel, 2004). For the leadership team and teaching staff at my school, I have generated new information regarding the needs of parents and provided feedback for individuals with regard to their behaviour during meetings. For parents and students, my research provided them with a safe and informal channel through which they were able to communicate their views to the school. Perhaps more importantly, participation in my research may have enabled all of those involved to engage with one another more effectively during future parent-teacher meetings.

Differing ethical codes

Finally, I will consider an ethical difficulty that was not raised by the University of Cumbria's Ethics Advisory Committee but which I see as pertinent to my study, namely my position as both a teacher and a researcher at the school in which my study will be based. This required me to switch roles as I moved from teaching to research tasks and may have been confusing or disconcerting for participants who were unsure whether to treat me as a teacher or a researcher. Perhaps more importantly, my conduct in these roles was governed by different ethical codes. The ethical guidelines provided by British Education Research Association, for example, emphasise the welfare

of participants (BERA, 2014). By contrast, those published by the Department for Education with regard to teachers make professional competence their primary consideration (DfE, 2011). Moreover, the ethical codes associated with teaching and research practices may not be compatible (Mockler, 2014). What might be acceptable in terms of classroom teaching – such as telling students what to do and imposing sanctions should they not comply – may be considered unacceptable within a research context. This is significant since the line between these differing codes can become blurred (Somekh, 2006; Zeni, 2013), meaning that research activities may be undertaken according to inappropriate ethical principles. To address this problem, and in accordance with the reflexive strategies I outlined in section 3.6.2, I recorded my intended research activities in my planner at the start of each working day. This caused me to distinguish between tasks which I undertook as a researcher and those that formed part of my everyday teaching practice. When acting as a researcher, I also made clear my role to participants and explained the implications of this in terms of their rights to confidentiality and non-participation.

Summary

Philosophical approach

I have assumed that realities are co-constructed by people during ordinary social interaction, though there will be restrictions regarding which versions of reality can be accepted. This approach rejects the notion of absolute

knowledge, meaning that I have no special authority and cannot discard the interpretations of participants. The evidence-based knowledge generated through my research, however, differs from that constructed by the participants and provides an alternative perspective from which to view parent-teacher meetings.

Case study research

Case studies are based on some 'bounded unit' and generate detailed information about a given phenomenon and its context. Case study research also considers the case as a whole and does not attempt to isolate individual variables. Whilst case studies generate context-specific findings, more general conclusions can be made if they are combined. Alternatively, others may transfer the findings generated by case study research to situations with which they are familiar. The set of parent-teacher conversations which took place at my school over two consecutive academic years constituted the unit of investigation for my study.

Sampling

I chose a sampling strategy based on random selection since this avoided personal bias. I did, however, purposively select a small number of conversations where I felt that interesting data would otherwise have been lost. Since the nature of parent-teacher meetings involving children of different ages may have differed, I recorded conversations at all of the parents' evening

events staged during the school year. In order to follow up any unusual or unexpected patterns of talk, I also collected data over two successive academic years.

Direct recordings

I gave precedence to recordings of parent-teacher conversations rather than interview data. Direct recordings can reveal unexpected patterns of talk, show how individuals relate to the context of their conversation, or identify behaviours of which the participants themselves are unaware. I chose audio rather than video recordings of conversations. Video recordings would take longer to analyse, meaning that fewer conversations could be examined, and would raise ethical issues with regard to privacy. The presence of a video camera would also have been more intrusive.

Interviews

In addition to direct recordings, I also conducted one-to-one interviews with participants, my aim being to generate a detailed background context for each meeting, gain insights into participants' thinking, and view conversations from alternative perspectives. Giving participants the chance to have their say is also ethically preferable and in keeping with a philosophical approach based on multiple realities.

I used an unstructured interview format, in which questions emerged spontaneously as each interview unfolded. This is a particularly suitable method for the study of a topic about which little is known. The open-ended nature of unstructured interviews also encouraged participants to speak freely and allowed them to introduce the topics that they considered relevant.

Interview evidence might have been less reliable than direct recordings since participants may have recalled conversations inaccurately or chosen not to respond openly. The direction of the interview might also have reflected my interests rather than participants' concerns. Moreover, younger students might have felt inhibited by the interview setting.

Data analysis

Conversation analysis focuses on how people use talk to achieve social tasks, thus relating directly to my research questions concerning participants' aims. The inductive nature of conversation analysis also makes it useful for the investigation of research topics about which little is known or where no prior theoretical framework exists.

Conversation analysis focuses on the immediate context of talk and focuses on the understandings created and shared between participants during their conversations. The procedures involved enabled me to recognise aspects of conversations that I might otherwise have overlooked or that would have been

inaccessible using other methods of data collection. This approach also reduced the potential for researcher bias.

I conducted a 'technical' analysis based on conversation analysis, followed by a 'situated' analysis in which I considered wider contexts. I adopted a simplified version of the transcription system most commonly used in conversation analysis, my aim being to balance detail against clarity and ease-of-use. The second stage of my data analysis was based on interview data and utilised analytical categories generated during the first.

Triangulation

I cross-checked factual statements made by participants during their conversations and interviews since inconsistencies may have given insights into their understandings and motives. I also used interview data to provide information relating to the wider contexts of conversations, thus enhancing my ability to interpret participants' talk. Additionally, I asked participants for their interpretations and presented these alongside my own, this being ethically preferable and in keeping with the constructionist premises on which my research is based.

Reflexivity

My particular personal characteristics will have influenced my findings.

Moreover, my role as an 'insider' researcher, though useful in some ways, will

have been particularly prone to bias and more likely to overlook the familiar. I therefore selected a range of reflexive strategies designed to raise my awareness of my part in the research process. These included: reflecting and writing about my personal history, values and beliefs; explicitly stating the reasoning behind my decisions; recording reflexive thoughts as they occurred during my research; and asking knowledgeable outsiders to provide critical feedback.

Ethics

With regard to anonymity and confidentiality, I did not use participants' names when presenting my findings and altered other details that might allow them to be identified. I also took steps to ensure secure data storage. To obtain informed consent, I explained the nature of my research – including the ethical risks – to participants, gave them the opportunity to ask questions and reminded them that they could withdraw at any time. I also asked a non-teaching member of staff to request consent from students. Regarding the potential costs to participants, I aimed to offset these by providing reciprocal benefits for those involved. To avoid confusing participants and ensure that I was working within the appropriate ethical code, I clearly delineated research activities from my everyday teaching.

Chapter 4 – Findings

In this chapter, I will present the findings which have emerged from my direct observations of parent-teacher conversations, supplemented by secondary data drawn from one-to-one interviews with the participants. I recorded and transcribed fifty-four meetings in total, all but two being attended by students. In two meetings, however, the participants withdrew consent after being presented with their copy of the transcript. This left me with fifty-two conversations in which all of the participants had agreed to be involved. To allow sufficient time for detailed analysis – see section 7.1, I randomly selected twenty of these conversations, two from each parents' evening event. The findings presented in this chapter are based on these twenty conversations.

I have divided this chapter into sections which relate to the themes identified in section 2.3 of my literature review, these being: communicating progress; harm avoidance; managing identity; conversational control; and mutual support. I have also added a further theme which emerged from my analysis of the data but which has not been reported in the studies I reviewed in section 2.3, namely attempts by parents and teachers to influence pupils. Within each of these sections, I will present a summary of my analysis, followed by excerpts from conversations to illustrate the relevant patterns of talk – details of the transcription notation I have used can be found in Appendix B. To support (or challenge) my interpretations and provide insights

into participants' thinking, I will also present evidence from one-to-one interviews with parents and teachers.

4.1 Reporting Progress

The reporting of students' academic progress by teachers was highly prevalent and occurred in seventeen of the twenty conversations I analysed in detail. Such sequences of talk tended to occur during the early part of meetings, often immediately after greetings had been completed – I will consider the significance of this in section 5.1.1. In this section, I will present excerpts from two conversations which illustrate the typical features of these opening sequences. I will then present evidence from two conversations which could be considered atypical but which provide clues regarding the intentions and expectations of the parents and teachers involved.

A common opening topic

Reporting sequences were almost always initiated by the teacher and usually consisted of a lengthy assessment of students' attainment in relation to their target levels, supported by documentary evidence such as mark sheets or exercise books. The following excerpt shows an example of a typical sequence in which the teacher began immediately – without prior discussion – by reporting the student's academic progress:

Excerpt 4.1.a

- 1 T: So how do you think you're doing?
- 2 S: (0.5) er:m (1.0)
- 3 M: £↑well she's on target↑£
- 4 S: hh hh
- 5 T: yes, we're on target in geography and erm we've actually
- 6 done two pieces of assessed work haven't we
- 7 S: yeh
- 8 T: both on tourism (.) and the first assessment we did (.) and
- 9 that was back at the end of June (0.2) ***** got an A↑
- 10 S: yeh
- 11 T: super (.) above target result (.) and that was fresh at the
- 12 end of the topic (0.2) now (0.2) I wanted to do a second
- 13 tourism test a different question on tourism (.) just to see
- 14 (.) first of all if students could put into practice the targets
- 15 that I'd given them the actual things to improve
- 16 M: yeh
- 17 T: at the end of June (.) secondly to see if they were
- 18 revising
- 19 M: mm hm
- 20 T: =because things >you know< over the summer holidays
- 21 an' over long periods of time do get forgotten
- 22 M: yep

As for most of the conversations I analysed, it was the teacher who introduced the topic of academic performance, in this case by inviting the student to assess her own progress (line 1). There was no discussion with regard to whether or not the meeting should focus on attainment or what other topics the parent might wish to discuss. Moreover, this was accepted without question by the parent and student, who encouraged the teacher to proceed with her assessment (e.g. lines 10 and 16).

During her follow-up interview, the teacher acknowledged that she had selected the topics that would be discussed in this conversation:

I was, kind of being cautious about not wanting to forget particular things, I had a bullet point list of the things I wanted to talk about, and I sat and talked about them, and then gave them a chance to talk about anything that I might not have covered at the end.

Teacher

This comment suggests that the teacher had been motivated by her concern to communicate the information that she felt to be important and did not feel the need to discuss her agenda with the parent or student beforehand.

One-way flow of information

Parents tended not to make substantive contributions during these opening sequences and allowed teachers to deliver their reports uninterrupted. Indeed, they often encouraged the teacher to speak at length by providing short continuers (e.g. 'yeh') or news receipts (e.g. 'oh') rather than full turns at talk. Where parents did communicate information relating to their child's learning, this tended to be limited and volunteered later in the meeting on completion of the teacher's assessment. The following excerpt comes from a conversation which consisted almost entirely of talk relating to the student's academic attainment and ways in which he could improve his exam performance.

Excerpt 4.1.b

- 28 T: =the last test we did was back in May and it was on the
29 target that you should be getting=
30 S: =^oyeah^o=
31 T: that (inaudible) test seems quite good d'you reckon
32 this is a strong subject for you?
33 S: yeah it's my strongest
34 T: yeah (.) and then here again (.) it's better (.) you're
35 on target (.) and you're slightly above it for those
36 ones erm that's quite promising >in fact you know<
37 I would say those results only prove what I was gonna
38 say and that is I feel like you're doing erm what you

- 3 T: three different things to talk about
- 4 M: → erm where wherever you want whatever's whatever (2.0)
- 5 I'll just get his report out I've got his report
- 6 T: °yes°
- 7 M: just checking here to see what we're doing (2.0)
- 8 S: OK
- 9 T: the grade I gave him was 4b
- 10 M: (0.5) 4b (.) right OK yeah
- 11 T: → so we'll start with assessment then
- 12 M: OK yeah great yeh

The parent appeared to be wrong-footed by this opening and, rather than answering the teacher in a straightforward manner, delivered a response marked by hesitation and repetition (line 4). Moreover, her choice of topic was limited since the teacher quickly added that he had 'three different things to talk about' (line 3) before offering academic performance as a candidate topic (line 9). The teacher's comments during his follow-up interview were revealing:

I started with 'So what do you want to know?' but really I did have an agenda. I always have an agenda, you know, even though I said that at the start. I've got things to talk about because there's a certain time limit, but if she brings something up I'm more than happy as well.

Teacher

It would thus appear that, despite inviting the parent to select the opening topic, this teacher did have issues of his own that he wished to discuss. Indeed, he went on to explain that, whilst he favoured the notion of two-way communication, the limited amount of time allocated to each conversation and the pressure he felt to report attainment and target levels effectively restricted the range of topics that he could discuss.

Giving advice to parents

In two conversations, the teachers went further than simply communicating information to parents and also offered advice relating to how they could more effectively support their children's learning. The excerpt below – taken from a meeting in which the student was not present – followed a long, unbroken stretch of talk by the teacher in which she delivered a negative report on the student's academic progress, punctuated by critical comments regarding his effort and attitude.

Excerpt 4.1.d

- 227 T: and he wasn't giving homework in 'cos he hadn't
228 got his book an' an' then there's gaps because what he's
229 done he's done on paper and then he's not (.)
230 S: yeh
231 T: stuck that into his book (.) but like I say we're back on
232 track now and he's more organised (.) but he could easily

233 have been doing the same thing for other people as well
234 (2.0)
235 S: yeah no I said to him that (0.5) you know that when I'm
236 doing the cooking you need to sit at the table (.) so that I
237 see you doing something (0.5) and I haven't done that did
238 I get his report about a week ago=
239 T: =yeah
240 S: a week and a half ago (1.0) 'cos that would be an easy
241 way [hh]
242 T: [yeh] just to keep tabs on him=
243 S: =you know I'm in the kitchen preparing and he must be
244 there 'cos (.) erm I could have [done that]
245 T: [>I mean<] do you check
246 → his planner you could (.) look in his homework erm
247 planner and see that he's done (.) what he's supposed to
248 do
249 S: ye[ah]
250 T: → [just] tick off the ones he's done (.) [says me]
251 S: [we're not]
252 T: I don't check my planner so so£ [ha ha]
253 S: [no:]
254 T: I always forget

At line 234, the teacher allowed a relatively long pause to develop, indicating that she had completed her evaluation. The parent responded by noting that

she had not been monitoring her child's homework activity as closely as she could (lines 237-238 and 244), thus taking partial responsibility for his poor performance. The teacher then suggested that the parent might look in the student's homework planner and 'tick off' his completed assignments (lines 245-250). The fact that the teacher held back her advice until this point in the conversation suggests that she was reluctant to offer advice until after the parent herself had acknowledged her shortcomings. Indeed, the teacher immediately followed her advice by light-heartedly confessing to being poor at checking her own planner (lines 250-254), thus softening any criticism that may have been implied. Of the conversations I analysed in detail, one other teacher offered advice regarding parental support. This also occurred relatively late in the conversation, though in this case the parent had explicitly requested advice.

4.2 Influencing Students

During my analysis, an unexpected – and previously unreported – pattern of behaviour emerged in which teachers, assisted by parents, worked to influence students with regard to some aspect of their learning. These sequences could be seen in almost every conversation in which a student was present, regardless of the age, gender or occupational status of the participants. In this section, I will present examples to illustrate the various forms that this talk could take and the conversational strategies used by parents and teachers to achieve their aims.

Improving attitudes and behaviour

Of the twenty conversations I analysed in detail, teachers reported problems or student shortcomings in eleven cases. In three of these, they took a challenging line and led the student through a series of carefully-framed questions designed to establish the 'facts' and get them to accept responsibility. Parents tended to act as spectators during the early part of these sequences, though some intervened to reinforce or extend the teacher's message later. The following example shows a sequence in which the teacher criticised the student's apparently flippant approach towards a recent homework assignment.

Excerpt 4.2.a

- 276 T: which makes me think >that you're not taking this fully
277 ser[iously]<
278 S: [right]
279 T: yes OK it does make you think of death and something
280 scary but take it seriously the=
281 S: =right
282 T: the writing is trying to create an effect on you
283 S: yeh
284 T: and bring this level of response up to the level of
285 [response]
286 M: [mm hm]

287 T: that you did [there]

288 M: → [just] take on that idea ***** you've gone

289 for a random leap (.) somewhere t'=

290 T: =totally random but (0.5)

291 M: → (inaudible) effort you know (.) zombie invasion is for

292 (pleasure) yeah but this is serious learning this is serious

293 stuff isn't it yeh=

294 S: =yeh

295 M: → yeh an' (.) an' it would be a shame if you're not to have

296 your X-box ((games console)) wouldn't it

297 S: yeh

298 M: because you kept leaping in with this nonsense here

299 yeh

300 S: right

301 T: → so keep it=

During this sequence, the parent worked to reinforce the teacher's message and appeared unsympathetic towards her child (lines 288-289 and 291-293). Indeed, at one point she threatened to take away his computer games console (lines 295-296), a sanction that the student described as particularly unwelcome during his interview. The parent also used tag questions at the end of her turns to solicit agreement from her child (lines 293, 296 and 299), suggesting that her aim during this sequence was to bring him around to her point of view (Moore and Podesva, 2009). For his part, the teacher supported the parent during this sequence by repeating her words (line 290) and

encouraging the student to follow his mother's advice (line 301). The evidence from their separate interviews, however, suggested that they were not quite so closely aligned as their talk during this sequence might suggest. Whilst the parent stated that she had been aiming to show her child that she was in agreement with his teachers – and so deny him 'wriggle room' – she also expressed doubts about how suitable this teacher's advice had been for her child:

I think the silliness, well, unless you know [my child], you don't, you could interpret that as a child being defiant or, taking the mickey out of what you've given them to do, or an attitude, but with [my child] it's genuinely not about that, he struggles to follow instructions, and it's untangling all that. When do I go in and say 'That's out of order, no X-box' and when do I say 'Let's talk about this'?

Parent

It would thus appear that, whilst this parent was willing to visibly support the teacher in front of her child, she also had private reservations with regard to his approach.

Encouraging greater effort

Talk in which students were placed under pressure by parents and teachers to work harder occurred in eight of the twenty conversations I analysed. The

example below is taken from a conversation involving a final-year student during which exam preparation was the central topic:

Excerpt 4.2.b

- 115 T: yes yeah I'd say do [an hour]
116 M: [I think] you could do an hour=
117 T: =mm
118 M: you know I when I well when I went to school I studied
119 three [four]
120 T: [yeah]
121 M: hours a day nowadays they don't have to do that any
122 more (.) you put half an hour an hour in for a subject (0.5) I
123 mean it's nothing
124 T: >well I I've said really< the A and A-star students who've
125 come through over the years >I mean< even
126 *****'s year group aren't getting those grades by
127 just doing the three hours in class and the homework that
128 was set ((***** is the student's older sister))
129 S: yeah yeah

Throughout this conversation, the teacher, supported by the parent, brought pressure to bear on the student by comparing her unfavourably with other, harder-working individuals or groups. In this sequence, the parent compared the amount of study she did herself when at school with the work that the

student currently appeared to be doing (lines 118-123). Similarly, the teacher described how high achieving students in a previous year group had worked hard to achieve the top grades (lines 124-128), implying that this was the standard expected of the student in question. The teacher then went on to make a further comparison by disclosing that some students who might not be expected to undertake extra study were in fact doing so.

Excerpt 4.2.c

145 T: start revising now (.) some people are telling me that
146 they're revising now in your group and £some of those
147 names might surprise you£

During her interview, the parent stated that the student had improved her test scores in maths following this meeting and pointed out that she was now hoping to take the subject at sixth form college.

The fact that we worked together meant that for me it was a really good conversation, because I wanted [my child] to put that little bit more effort in. I wasn't concerned, more that I wanted her to do better, which she has done after this conversation, 'cos her results started picking up. Yeah, it made a lot of difference

Parent

However, the student claimed that she had already been working hard before this conversation had taken place and that it had made little difference to her subsequent effort, though she did acknowledge that she was now answering more questions in class.

After this meeting, I just kept up the same revision I was doing, to be honest. I mean, in lessons I'd try and answer more questions to try and get [the teacher] to have a better view of me and my abilities, to kind of show her I have been putting in the effort. So, it was, kind of like, trying to prove my point.

Student

By contrast, the teacher took a less positive view. She pointed out that the student had not, following this meeting, changed her attitude with regard to lunchtime revision sessions and that she had still needed to be coaxed into attending.

Giving advice

In eleven of the twenty conversations I analysed, teachers followed their assessment by suggesting ways in which students could improve as learners. This advice could be general in nature and focused on common skills such as exam technique, or more specific and concerned with improving technical aspects of the subject in question. These sequences were invariably

supported by parents, with students indicating their compliance through short, one-word responses.

Excerpt 4.2.d

- 62 T: =explain things explain using the word 'because' extend
63 your explanation (.) and to get over the hump into level
64 five (.)
- 65 M: mm
- 66 T: you need to be start being a little more technical
- 67 S: OK
- 68 T: when the poem says for example 'like rabbit and deer'
69 that's what we call a simile
- 70 M: right
- 71 S: right
- 72 T: so it's it's with you ***** you need to be a little bit more
73 technical >you say< this simile makes me think of (.)
- 74 M: like [you need to use similes and]
75 T: [er a scared animal for instance]
- 76 M: metaphors and actually nail that [down]
- 77 T: [but] then it's mainly for
78 effect
- 79 M: so main mainly (1.0) >what would you call it< (1.0)
80 you'd call it=
81 T: =a device [it's a device]

82 M: [a device] so it's mainly a device
 83 S: right
 84 M: and explain how it affects
 85 S: and use 'because'
 86 T: [and use]
 87 M: [yes yes]
 88 T: 'because' and use 'because' to extend your explanation
 89 M: explanation
 90 T: and that's level five stuff which is where we which is
 91 where we're heading
 92 M: where we want to be

In this sequence, the parent repeatedly endorsed the teacher's advice through non-verbal and single-word expressions of support (lines 65, 70 and 89) or by rephrasing his words (line 92). Additionally, she delivered a fully formulated turn – assisted by the teacher – in which she extended his preceding instruction (lines 74-76). Elsewhere in this conversation, the teacher reciprocated by explicitly supporting the parent:

Excerpt 4.2.e

402 M: are you going to (work) at it (.) yeh↑ y' at the moment
 403 the more the more you work at it the more pleasure you'll
 404 get out of it as well (.) [yeh OK]
 405 T: → [that's true] that's true (.) there's

406 nothing wrong with reading history books *****
407 M: right and it's not supposed to be a problem yeah I love
408 reading

During her interview, the parent played down the importance of parent-teacher meetings as opportunities for home-school communication and suggested that they were more useful as a means to further her child's academic and social development. Indeed, she pointed out that this conversation would have been less productive had her child not been present since this would have precluded the possibility of influencing him directly.

Support and reassurance

The evidence generated during my study suggests that not all of the work done to influence students was aimed at improving their effort or behaviour. Talk in which parents and teachers worked to reassure or boost the confidence of students occurred in five meetings, three of which involved children with special educational needs. There was little repetition or hesitation in talk of this nature and few signs of tension between the participants. Moreover, the students in these conversations were all considered to be conscientious and hardworking by their teachers. The central issue in the following excerpts – all taken from the same conversation – was whether or not the student had the technical ability to pursue a particular examination course during the following academic year.

Excerpt 4.2.f

- 49 S: =I like writing but I'm not too great at it I can't (write)
50 to save my life
- 51 T: well actually ***** my notes about your writing says that
52 → you've got a lot of potential with your writing because
53 you do write very (.) sensitively and you pay attention to
54 the small details and you work very (.) carefully with
55 storylines as well (.) so actually I see potential may maybe
56 you haven't yet produced a finished piece of writing that
57 you think wow that's super but I can see at this stage in
58 → year nine that you can write already >and you've got the
59 potential to do some really nice writing< and actually
60 the at the at the heart of this course the one thing that (.)
61 erm examiners like to see is that you started off by doing
62 some free writing as part of your research so we will
63 be doing lots of writing (.) an' believe me just just relax
64 'cos you will do it nicely
- 65 F: → I think we've seen a big improvement actually in her
66 ability she's changed
- 67 T: yeh
- 68 F: because she's producing work that's more competent
69 (.) isn't it
- 70 S: na:y ((denial sounds half-hearted))

Excerpt 4.2.g

86 T: yeh and that is one of the qualities that you've got which'll
87 make you (.) >succeed at GCSE< is that you are (.) a
88 trier aren't you (.) you are a hard worker and you want to
89 achieve success you don't give up do you and just throw
90 the towel in (.) you do actually carry on an' say no I'll
91 → give it another go (.) an' I'll be there with you every step
92 of the way so together we'll we'll get there we'll have
93 success

Excerpt 4.2.h

149 T: it's called modifying and refining your work an' there's a
150 massive stack of marks there for people who are willing
151 >to do it some people< aren't willing to do it they just rip it
152 up and put it in the bin and they never have any evidence
153 that they've been willing to turn something that's not
154 going so well into something that actually working >better
155 → but you've< got the ability to do that so that'll be to your
156 advantage on the course

These examples show how the student's self-critical comment relating to her writing skills (lines 49-50) triggered a series of 'reassurance' sequences in which the teacher and parent worked to boost her confidence. In excerpt 4.2.f,

for example, the teacher used evidence from her notes to contradict the student (lines 51-55 and 58-59). She also highlighted the student's personal qualities – namely her work ethic and her ability to persevere (lines 87-91). Additionally, the teacher stated that she would be working alongside the student to support her throughout the course, this being reinforced by her pronoun shift from 'you' to 'we' (lines 91-92). For his part, the parent followed the teacher's lead and pointed to the noticeable progress that his daughter had made through practising her writing at home.

Two conversational features serve to indicate that the parent and teacher in these excerpts are being persuasive as well as supportive. Firstly, both used tag questions (lines 69 and 88) to encourage the student to agree with them (cf. excerpt 4.2.a). Also, the teacher compared the student to those who were unwilling to demonstrate progression by documenting their mistakes (lines 151-156), thus placing her in a positive light (cf. excerpt 4.2.b).

During their separate interviews, both the parent and the teacher acknowledged that they considered the student's writing abilities to be limited, thus justifying the student's apparent lack of confidence. However, the teacher explained that her work to reassure the student during this meeting could have followed as a natural consequence of her very positive classroom approach.

I'm putting on a show. I'm, I'm trying to be, I think it's in my nature as a teacher, because of the subject that I teach, that everything is about confidence,

I believe, so in the classroom I don't do anything that might possibly risk making them feel lacking in confidence.

Teacher

For his part, the father welcomed the teacher's enthusiasm and described how he and his wife had been trying to support her to allay their daughter's concerns. The student herself, however, seemed under no illusions about her limited talents, though she stated that she had not been seeking reassurance and had simply wanted to know if her skills were sufficient to continue with the subject.

4.3 Avoiding Harm

I will now present evidence to show how the teachers in my study constructed their talk so as to avoid criticism or deter challenges to their professional authority. The relatively large number of excerpts I have presented in this section reflects the prevalence and diversity of the harm avoidance strategies I observed.

Getting the student to speak first

The following example is taken from the start of a conversation in which the teacher challenged the student at length about his poor homework record.

She did not do this directly, however, but began by first of all asking the student to assess his own progress.

Excerpt 4.3.a

- 1 T: → erm what I'm gonna do first of all ***** <is> ask you how
2 you feel you're getting on
3 S: e::rm (2.0) alright ((this utterance took 6 seconds))
4 (3.0)
5 S: yeah I prefer to be er (1.0) like getting on in class
6 T: uh huh
7 S: because like erm (1.0) >in science<
8 T: >yeh<
9 S: I'm sat next to ***** ((classmate))
10 T: right
11 S: (0.5) who's like=
12 M: =who was that
13 T: *****
14 S: yeh (1.0) an' he's like (0.5) >y'know< not good for
15 me (.) if you get what I mean
16 T: OK so (.) you possibly feel distracted by the people
17 around you
18 S: yeah=
19 T: → =OK I would say that is possibly true (.) erm there can be
20 times where you and ***** are a little bit off task do you

- 21 think that's fair to say
- 22 S: er yeh

During the student's response, the teacher encouraged him to speak through her use of short continuers (lines 8, 10 and 12) before summarising and evaluating his assessment (lines 22-23 and 25). She also did work to secure the student's agreement (line 27), the full formulation she used suggesting that she considered it important to get the student to acknowledge her comments as truthful and reasonable. For his part, the student seemed nervous or wary during the early stages of this conversation, shown by his hesitant replies (lines 7, 9 and 20-21) and the long pauses that he allowed to develop when he was selected to take a turn (lines 3 and 20).

Taking supporting evidence into account, there are two possible explanations for the teacher's opening strategy. Firstly, this teacher was newly-qualified at the time of the meeting, having entered teaching directly after university. The conversation from which this excerpt was taken was therefore one of her very first professional contacts with a parent. Given this context and the fact that she intended to confront the student about his homework record it seems reasonable to suppose that she might have proceeded cautiously. Getting the student to assess himself, acknowledge his own shortcomings, and accept the teacher's critical comment as fair and reasonable could thus be seen as a defensive strategy. During her interview, however, the teacher provided an alternative interpretation. She explained that she had asked the student to speak first as a practical way to avoid an unnecessarily long meeting:

My main thought was that if he was aware of his shortcomings and the areas that he needs to improve then that's probably half of my battle, 'cos if he, if he knows what he's doing wrong then my job is then just to ... make it explicitly clear what he needs to do, rather than pointing out what he hasn't done ... It would have been a longer conversation if I'd asked him how he thought this year had gone and he'd said 'Brilliantly' ... erm, 'cos I'd have started by pointing out the reasons why it wasn't so brilliant.

Teacher

Given the time pressures faced by teachers during parents' evenings, this explanation seems plausible and is supported by the large number of meetings on the teacher's appointment sheet. It is also consistent with her apparent reluctance to prolong the meeting on completion of her 'official' business. However, the teacher did not ask the student to speak first in her other recorded conversation and instead delivered her assessment without delay. This suggests that she only used this strategy in certain conversations and supports an explanation based on caution – necessary only for 'difficult' encounters – rather than time pressure – which would presumably apply to all the meetings during a busy parents' evening.

Allowing the parent to raise problems first

In three conversations, teachers glossed over student shortcomings or held back criticism until after the parent had raised a problem issue. The following

excerpt has been taken from a conversation in which the teacher was concerned about the student's organisation, test results and the quality of his written work.

Excerpt 4.3.b

28 T: an' he started in y' erm in year ten before the summer he
29 he was great I was really pleased (.) now the spe' an' I
30 said to him >you know< remember I said y' y' I felt that
31 you could have gone up to the erm the top set keep keep
32 performing like that >but then I don't know what
33 happened over the summer< but he came back and erm
34 he seemed to have lost all his motivation

Here, the teacher softened her criticism by first of all delivering praise (lines 29-32) and then suggesting that his recent lack of motivation could have been due to some external event (lines 32-33). Shortly afterwards, however, the parent also made critical comments regarding her child's effort, prompting the teacher to deliver a more forthright account of his poor performance.

Excerpt 4.3.c

60 T: he just did a couple of lines instead of having these three
61 paragraphs explaining what some religious people think
62 and what other religious people think and then his own point

63 of view (.) so eight out of eighteen was a really disappointing
64 result for him <erm>
65 M: → he (inaudible) my impression is that he does the bare
66 minimum=
67 T: =yes that's what he did there [he did]
68 M: [so <erm>]
69 T: just the bare minimum
70 M: erm I say things to him like >you know< do you not want
71 to give a fuller answer (.) for it's own sake f' you know for
72 the sort of you know write the I dunno the (1.0) to be
73 proud of giving a fuller answer d'you kn' or or I might put
74 it in terms >you know< do you not want to please your
75 teacher or d'you not want to know more and research
76 more or (.) talk to me about it
77 T: → he can do it an' I know he can (.) like you say part of it is >a bit
78 of laziness I'll do the bare minimum I can I can get away
79 with< but part of it was this disorganisation with the book
80 (.) which we've got we've overcome now because I have
81 his exercise book here (.) er but (.) there's still that sort of
82 → <erm> (1.5) just sort of knocking it out type erm attitude
83 because he's not he's not even the answer's don't always
84 → make sense because he can't be bothered finishing the
85 sentence or (.) you know (.) so he needs to watch that

In this sequence, the parent noted that her child tended to do as little as possible (lines 66-67), before pointing out the efforts she had made to persuade him to work harder (lines 70-76). Once the parent had made known her views, however, the teacher proceeded to deliver a much more forthright account for his poor performance. Indeed, she now accounted for the student's poor performance in terms of his personality, as opposed to the external factors which she had invoked previously (lines 78, 82 and 84). It would thus seem that the teacher had withheld her judgement of the student during the early part of this conversation until after the parent had provided the 'green light' by revealing her own disapproval.

Pronoun switching

In seven conversations the teacher shifted pronouns by moving from 'I' or 'you' to 'we' when addressing the student. This tended to occur when the teacher was attempting to persuade or reassure the student or at 'awkward' moments in a conversation. Similar pronoun switches occurred when teachers addressed parents in the two conversations in which the student was not present. In the following excerpt, the teacher had to deal with the potentially delicate matter of the student's conduct with his girlfriend between lessons.

Excerpt 4.3.d

183 T: I also need to have to have a little chat with him about his
184 behaviour on the corridor don't I ***** what what am I

185 going to say

186 M: are we talking about *****? we know they know we're

187 going to support you on this I shall be putting my foot

188 down as well er it's a major issue and he knows it=

189 T: =yeah it's just in school isn't it where they're just a

190 little [bit a little bit]

191 M: [(inaudible)]

192 T: → inappropriate eh ***** (.) we've all been young

193 >you know< £believe it or not me and yer mum have been

194 young£ >you know< I'm not you know what I mean but an'

195 → you and ***** great lovely but we can't have <inappropriate

196 behaviour in [the corridor>]

197 M: [I mean] ***** ((older sister)) is on his back a lot

198 T: he's not on his own there's others as well but I can't >you

199 know< erm I'm sure=

200 M: =really I mean he has got to work and they're in the

201 [same class]

202 T: [but there's] a time and a place for that [you know *****]

The teacher began this sequence by speaking in the first person (lines 183-185) but then switched to 'we' during her following turn (lines 192 and 195). At line 192, the teacher's use of 'we' gives the impression that she was including both herself and the student, thus working to build affiliation and establish common ground. At line 195, however, it is less clear to whom 'we' refers. On the one hand, the teacher might have been speaking on behalf of herself and

the parent. In this case her use of 'we' could be considered as a persuasive device to bring extra pressure on the student (cf. excerpt 4.2.d, line 91). On the other, she might have been using 'we' to suggest that she was speaking on behalf of the school, thus distancing herself personally from the firm line she was taking.

During her interview, the teacher described this parent as confrontational, noting that she had clashed with other members of staff on several previous occasions.

She's quite a tricky customer, isn't she? She can be quite challenging and she used to be e-mailing and ringing up all the time when [her child] was younger an', erm, anything that was upsetting, she, she had quite strong opinions about and so I suppose, before parents' evening, I was prepared maybe for her not being happy about things.

Teacher

It thus seems likely that the teacher was being particularly cautious during this conversation, supporting the notion that she was using 'we' as a defensive measure. The teacher pointed out, however, that she had not consciously switched pronouns and had not realised that she had modified her talk in this way.

Evasive talk

In two conversations, the teachers involved changed the subject or gave an ambiguous response when questioned. The sequence below is taken from a conversation in which the parent was seeking to determine why her daughter had been recently underachieving.

Excerpt 4.3.e

- 21 T: we've been doing some lunch time sessions which
22 you're welcome to drop into (.) and if you wanted to
23 instigate any and say what topics you're stuck with
24 (.) erm
- 25 M: → =but she hasn't been yet?
26 → (0.5)
- 27 S: I've been to the (.) [er]
- 28 T: [one] of them but you were OK
29 with the last [topic]
- 30 S: [yeah] yeah
- 31 M: → has she been?
- 32 S: I didn't get full marks
- 33 T: → (0.5) no you [didn't]
34 M: [she didn't?]
- 35 T: no erm but but you got full marks on the test (.) I'm going
36 to start giving little tests in the lessons as well (0.5) erm so

During this sequence, the parent twice questioned the teacher about her child's attendance at lunchtime revision sessions (lines 25 and 31). The teacher, however, did not respond to either question in a straightforward manner. At line 26, she allowed a pause to develop, after which it was the student who filled the gap. This is significant since the question was clearly directed towards the teacher, who had up to this point delivered her talk without hesitation. Moreover, when the teacher did take up her turn, she addressed her response to the student rather than the parent. This resulted in a short exchange between the teacher and the student, at the end of which it was not clear whether the student had attended the revision session or not. At this point, the parent put her question to the teacher for a second time (line 31). Again, the teacher appeared hesitant and responded to the student rather than the parent. (line 33). Indeed, she used the student's comment to shift the topic of conversation (lines 35-36), leaving the parent's question unanswered.

During their respective interviews, all three participants described – at some length – an episode prior to this conversation that may explain the teacher's wariness. It emerged that the student had approached the teacher to ask for help with an aspect of the subject that she was finding difficult. Rather than providing direct support, however, the teacher had responded by recommending relevant learning materials and staging a lunchtime revision session for all of the students in their class. The student was not satisfied with the help she had received during this session, however, and reported this to their mother, who promptly drove to the school to confront the teacher. The

interview comments from the parent and the teacher suggest contrasting versions of the exchange that followed.

I went to see [the teacher] because [my daughters] were quite upset. I felt a bit guilty, going to see her, because I think there was a miscommunication between [my daughter] and the teacher, so, er, so you're kind of being in the middle, so I just you don't, it's not about attacking, but it's like, you know, you, you want to have a good relationship with the teacher so it was a bit of, er, a difficult conversation.

Parent

I thought Mum was guns blazing when she came in because [her daughter] had wound her up, an', to be honest, I was annoyed, really annoyed. I thought that was over stepping the mark. I was wary of her after saying what she did to get her mum to come in at quarter past three on a Friday. Quite animated she was.

Teacher

Whether the parent had gone in 'guns blazing' or not, it would appear that the teacher – based on her recent experience with this parent – had been acting more cautiously at the start of this conversation for fear of provoking further confrontation.

Mitigated talk

Throughout my study, teachers exercised great care when they spoke to parents about students and were often reluctant to criticise directly or say anything that might hurt the feelings to either party. They achieved this through the use of a diverse range of conversational tools – typically employing several of these within the same sequence. In some cases, teachers adapted the content of their talk, for example by preceding critical comments with praise. In other cases, they modified the form of their talk through hedging, repetition, delay or the use of laughter. In the following example, the teacher has just delivered a fairly positive assessment of the student's academic progress and is about to embark on a new and potentially delicate topic of conversation.

Excerpt 4.3.f

64 T: we did discuss something about this year there's a bit
65 of a change from last year y' your organisation's not
66 quite as good as last year >we think< OK? you've had a
67 couple of occasions where our organisation's meant we
68 haven't quite got our homework in on time hasn't it yeah?
69 and I think that's down to organisation rather than
70 >thinking am not gonna do my homework< 'cos *****'s
71 attitude to work is very good and it's not that you're gonna
72 forget to do it or not want to do it but getting back in the

73 habit of checking your planner OK the night before or
74 when you've got get in the habit of doing homework the
75 night you get it and again it may be that some of the
76 homeworks because we I teach you I think maybe once a
77 week it can sometimes be quite a long time period
78 between getting the homework and the homework having
79 to be in

At the start of this sequence, the teacher played down the size of the problem by hedging his claims (lines 64-67), thus creating the impression that this was not a serious matter. He also switched pronouns (lines 64 and 66), moving from 'I' to 'we', thus giving the impression that he was merely one of several members of staff who felt this to be a problem (cf. excerpt 4.3.d). Moreover, the teacher worked to attribute the cause of the student's missed homework assignments to her poor organisation (line 69) – exacerbated by an external cause in the form of an uneven distribution of science lessons across the student's timetable – and emphasised that this was not due to a poor attitude on her part (lines 70-71). This distinction seems important since his suggestion that the student could not organise herself well enough, despite her best efforts, carried no moral implications. Had the teacher attributed the student's poor homework record to her attitude, however, then this would have placed her at fault. The parent's response to the teacher a few lines later was revealing.

Excerpt 4.3.g

- 91 F: I'm absolutely convinced it's not because she she
92 doesn't er=
93 T: =no I'm sure >but I'm saying< if=
94 F: → =I apologise if
95 T: there's no not=
96 F: =she's had a bad year to be honest [with]
97 T: [right]
97 F: lots of things going wrong (.) quite badly

Here, the parent apologised to the teacher on behalf of his daughter (line 94) and then explained the problem by alluding to difficulties occurring in other areas of her life (line 96). This may be significant since it suggests that the parent felt accountable for his daughter's conduct with regard to homework.

Interviews with the participants revealed a background context to this case that could account for the teacher's evident caution. It emerged that this student, whilst academically able, had specific learning difficulties for which she had a statutory entitlement to receive extra support during lessons. During his interview, the teacher described how this had influenced his thinking during his meeting with the parent.

I haven't got in my mind whether her, her organisational problems and occasional lapses in class are a result of her, erm, special needs, as it were, or

because she's being lazy or idle. I haven't quite got that set in my mind, so I was trying to be very diplomatic in how I spoke. I didn't use, I was very careful, much more careful in my language speaking to this family than I would have been with another family.

Teacher

It would seem, therefore, that this teacher had been sensitive to the feelings of both the student and her parent and that this may have prompted him to tread carefully when raising the problem of missed homework.

Light-heartedness and humour

In five of the conversations I analysed, the parents and teachers involved expressed their views in a light-hearted way or used humour in order to dispel tension. In the following excerpt, the teacher – aided by the parent – worked to avoid appearing overly critical when suggesting that the student should have been making better use of her revision guides.

Excerpt 4.3.h

- 88 T: when we do something in a class I think you at the end of the
89 week or after the lesson just need to go over it a second time (.)
90 just spend five minutes >have you got these revision guides<
91 S: yeh

- 92 T: → fare they in beautiful neat mint condition like these
- 93 S: (0.5) ye:ah ((sounds uncertain))
- 94 T: yes
- 95 M: → fwell if you were using [them they wouldn't be]
- 96 S: [he he he he]
- 97 T: she should be
- 98 S: I did use it for the last test

This sequence gives the impression of friendly support and encouragement rather than disapproval. An examination of the supporting evidence relating to this case suggests that the student was regarded by teaching staff as academically able. In the months leading up to this meeting, however, she had lost confidence in her abilities and had convinced herself that she was failing, possibly exacerbated by the fact that her closest school friends regularly excelled. Indeed, the student had experienced several panic attacks during lessons, resulting in a considerable amount of missed school work. It is therefore possible that the teacher was working particularly hard during this conversation to avoid causing the student further anxiety.

Preceding with praise

Before reporting disappointing academic performance or delivering criticism, teachers invariably commented favourably on some aspect of the student's learning or their personal qualities. In the following excerpt, the teacher criticises the student's effort in class and reports a below-target test result.

Excerpt 4.3.i

- 17 T: [so y' your] the way you're
18 concentration in lessons the questions you ask the things
19 → you do are at A standard (.) and you're much more
20 mature than you were in years >seven eight nine<
21 S: yeh
22 T: and you're much better at it (.) your work that you put on
23 paper though lags behind
24 S: er (.) yeah
25 T: it's what you do in your book it's that little bit more extra
26 effort and it's it's just not happening
27 S: right
28 T: → yeh (.) but verbally I think >you know you were
29 pupil of the week I think< and ***** said you
30 were fantastic with her >as I say< verbally huge
31 potential you're obviously very intelligent 'cos you
32 ask really really good questions (.) it's just the (.) that
33 that test you did with me you got a grade D

In this sequence, the teacher emphasised the positive aspects of the student's conduct during lessons (lines 17-22) before commenting less favourably on the quality of his written work. Similarly, he highlighted the student's intelligence and academic potential (lines 28-32) before reporting a poor test result. During his interview, the teacher explained that he had been keen to

keep this conversation as positive as possible. He pointed out that the student had improved in certain respects and that to dwell on the negative aspects of his learning would have been both unnecessary and unhelpful.

I think there's lots of things you could criticise [the student] on, but I don't think it would have been helpful if I'd started going on about all the things he's done wrong when he's actually doing things right. He can see for himself that grade D is rubbish, an' he knows that, an' he knows his handwriting's poor. He knows these things. He's been told often enough and I don't need to tell him again and again and again.

Teacher

This comment suggests that the teacher was motivated to soften his criticism by practical considerations rather than an ethical concern to protect the feelings of the parent or student.

4.4 Managing Identity

The parents and teachers in my study often appeared to be working to present themselves in a favourable light. In this section, I will provide examples to illustrate how they went about this, together with interview evidence from the participants regarding their motives.

Projecting competence

In eight of the conversations I analysed, the parents or teachers constructed their talk in ways to suggest that they were competent in their respective roles. The parents in these conversations described educational activities that they had done with their child outside of school or learning resources that they had provided within the home, whilst the teachers referred to examples of good professional practice. The excerpt below is taken from a year seven parents' evening (11-12 age range) and involved two parents and a teacher who had not previously met.

Excerpt 4.4.a

- 47 T: I know that the practise is going on (.) and obviously I
48 can go round and listen to that >but if ever I ask you
49 anything< you always know the answer and you're
50 → always keen to join in erm >I mean in lessons< we do lots
51 of different activities don't we we do a lot of activities on
52 the white board erm and it tends to be lots of short
53 snappy activities (.) rather than (.) a long task
54 F: → we've been trying to watch more foreign language films
55 haven't we we watched one the other week didn't we
56 M: yeah fit's a bit much in' itf
57 F: well how can he (.) he did alright (.) it had subtitles we
58 read 'em as we went along

Here, it would appear that both the father and the teacher were working to establish positive identities for themselves, though neither did so explicitly. Over lines 50-53, for example, the teacher mentioned that her lessons involved a wide range of learning activities. This could be seen as a simple factual statement designed to inform the parents that their child – who was very quiet – could participate in her lessons in a variety of ways. Alternatively, her talk creates the impression of fast-paced and varied lessons, and so could be seen as an attempt to establish herself as a competent professional. The fact that both the parent and the teacher inserted tag questions – aimed at the student – into their turns to corroborate their claims is revealing. This suggests that they were engaged in persuasive talk (cf. excerpt 4.2.a), thus supporting the notion that they were working to establish their parental and professional identities in addition to exchanging information. Further support for this idea comes from the comments made by the teacher during her interview:

None of the parents, I don't think, particularly, I don't think I'd met them before. They were pretty much a whole new set of parents, so you're getting to know them and they're getting to know you, an' I think it's, you know, you do need to make a good relationship with them, because you're gonna see them later on in the school.

Teacher

It would thus appear that this teacher was sensitive to the fact that she was meeting these parents for the first time and so felt that it was important need to make a good impression.

The teacher as expert

The teachers in my study often focused on transmitting the knowledge that they possessed and did not ask parents for information or advice, thus casting themselves in the role of expert. They also appeared to defend their expert status where this seemed to be threatened. In the following excerpt, for example, the parent indicated that she had some knowledge of the teacher's subject.

Excerpt 4.4.b

- 122 M: there's some good things on You Tube on cooking
123 everyday food and the way the guy uses different (.)
124 ingredients (inaudible) he actually uses a tin of
125 Heinz baked beans (inaudible) Heinz baked beans but
126 he actually goes through all the stages of the recipe
127 T: → very useful (.) your mum's right the You Tube clips the
128 tutorials that they have an' all sorts of things like your
129 cookery d'you >I don't know if you've looked at any on
130 → You Tube and that< such wonderful stuff I sit and watch
131 them regularly

In this sequence, the parent recommended that her daughter should use a web resource to improve her drawing skills (lines 122-126). This prompted the teacher to endorse her advice (line 127), comment on the quality of the video material (line 130) and state that she regularly used this resource herself (lines 130-131). Taken at face value, the teacher's response could be seen as an attempt to support the parent. Indeed, this was the argument put forward by the teacher during her interview. The parent's suggestion, however, had also revealed her knowledge of the teacher's subject area. By first evaluating the parent's advice and then making it clear that she was already familiar with the resource in question, it could be argued that the teacher was also working to re-establish herself as the expert.

This parent also demonstrated her familiarity with the teacher's subject when she described the nature of an ingredient that the student had been working with during her after school cookery classes (which were run by another member of staff and did not involve the teacher in question).

Excerpt 4.4.c

- 221 T: yeh yeh you can bring some in and come up at
222 lunchtime and show me if you wanted to
223 M: yeh? ((probably said to the student)) it looks and feels
224 essentially like cooked pasta
225 T: yeh
226 M: → which is surprising to picture (.) it takes about three hours=

227 T: → =how are you like to work with erm new ingredients like
 228 that (.) you s' have you seen er *****'s work >in the room
 229 you know that wall display< with the photos of her
 230 coursework

Here, the teacher did not acknowledge the information offered by the parent. Indeed, she interrupted the parent to address the student about her cooking skills, effectively selecting a different speaker and changing the subject of the conversation. During her interview, the teacher openly admitted that air-drying clay was a modelling material with which she was unacquainted.

There was a point where [the parent] mentioned an ingredient an' I just didn't respond and, I think, sometimes when I do that it's because I haven't, I'm not, erm, very well up on what they're talking about, so it's my lack of knowledge, actually, an' I kind of like just clam up or wash over it an' move on to the next thing. I don't say "I've not heard of that before, what's that?" because I think I'll probably look stupid, ignorant and uneducated, ha, ha, ha so it's like a preservation of my self-esteem.

Teacher

It would appear from these comments that the teacher had been working to avoid exposing her lack of knowledge and so preserve her status as the subject expert.

Identity work as incidental

As I have noted, the parents and teachers in my study often appeared to be constructing certain identities for themselves. However, this aim was never openly-stated and tended to occur in passing whilst matters relating to students' learning were being discussed. Identity work thus formed a backdrop to the 'official business' of the conversation rather than a topic in its own right. The following excerpt was taken from a conversation involving a final year student who was worried that she would fail to meet her targets.

Excerpt 4.4.d

- 65 T: I've made a note that you were concerned about test grades
66 S: yeh
67 T: er and you mustn't be because
68 M: that's because of her science result ((unexpectedly low))
69 T: yeah yeh (.) you mustn't worry because you're working
70 → really well (.) and when I do mark assessments I always
71 use the ((exam board)) mark scheme and the grade
72 boundaries that they give so I do stick to those rigidly (.)
73 and if anything I am on the strict side so (.) you should be
74 growing in confidence I hope each time you do these little
75 assessment tests

Over lines 70-73, the teacher stated that she adhered strictly to exam board guidelines when marking test papers. Whilst this may have been intended to reassure the student by suggesting that her test scores were genuinely good, it also reflected favourably on the teacher's competence as a professional. The parent's talk which followed shortly afterwards could also be viewed as identity work.

Excerpt 4.4.e

- 81 T look at these lovely lovely case study and revision notes (.)
82 *****'s really good at making revision material
83 M: → oh yeah she shows me every week yeah she showed me
84 at the week end
85 T: and I really would encourage her to keep on doing that

Here, the parent may have been working to boost the student's confidence by confirming the very positive assessment just delivered by the teacher. In doing so, however, she also gave the impression that she was an approachable parent who took an active interest in her daughter's school work. Later in the conversation, identity work again appears to be taking place.

Excerpt 4.4.f

- 148 M: I don't have any worries erm (.) because I'm pleased with
149 the report on the whole so (.) if her (grades) start slipping

the teacher acknowledged that she had been working to establish her credentials as a capable and conscientious professional during this meeting, though she pointed out that her principle aim had been to reassure the parent and the student.

I do like to present myself as a teacher who knows what they're doing, but I don't set out to do that overtly. That happens as a secondary thing. I wouldn't want to over-egg that one, if you know what I mean. I think it gives the parents confidence if you appear to know what you're on about.

Teacher

The parent and teacher in this conversation thus did not deny that they had been working to cast themselves in a positive light. They did, however, play down the importance of identity work or suggest that this had not been their deliberate intention.

Identity work by proxy

In five conversations, parents appeared to be constructing an identity on behalf of the student rather than themselves. The following excerpt follows a very positive assessment by the teacher.

Excerpt 4.4.g

- 70 M: → not that I can help very much but I think it is that you you
71 quite enjoy it
72 S: yeah [I like]
73 M: → [I think] she finds it fun almost like a hobby or
74 something
75 T: that's really interesting 'cos I've I presumed that you
76 perhaps did speak french and that perhaps ***** [was]
77 M: [ha ha]
78 T: >you know< she was getting help from home and I
79 don't mean that in a bad way [I mean]
80 M: [a bit] of spanish (.) not [french]
81 T: [right]
82 M: yeah
83 T: that's even better °that's even more impressive well
84 done° ((sounds like an aside to student))
85 M: → she'll actu' I'll go over it she'll read it to me but it's all her
86 £work£
87 S: (inaudible)
88 M: → yeah you can tell that she quite enjoys it really

During this sequence the parent stated three times that her daughter found the teacher's subject enjoyable and spent time at home working on her language learning (lines 70, 73 and 88). The parent also made it clear that she

did not give her child any ‘unfair’ assistance at home (lines 85-86), thus allowing the student to receive full credit for the high quality of her work. It would appear from this that the parent was constructing herself as a supportive and well-informed parent. However, she also presented her daughter as an enthusiastic and competent language learner. Later in the conversation, the parent again appeared to be speaking on behalf of her daughter in order to create a favourable impression.

Excerpt 4.4.h

- 125 M: didn't you go up a grade last term
126 S: I dunno
127 T: oh [but you're]
128 M: → [she was] quite pleased=
129 T: =yeah you're now a [level yeah]
130 S: [oh yeah]
131 T: a very sound level six now [erm]
132 M: → [she] was really [pleased]
133 T: [an' I] think

Here, the parent initially stated that her daughter was ‘quite pleased’ to reach her target level (line 128), before upgrading this to ‘really pleased’ at line 132. It would thus appear that the parent was again working to present her child in a positive light – this time by drawing attention to the value that her daughter had placed on moving up to a higher level.

4.5 Conversational Control

In this section, I will provide examples to suggest that the teachers in my study established and maintained control of meetings, and that parents allowed them to do so. I will also present interview evidence from the parents and teachers involved to illustrate their views.

Setting the agenda

In all but two of the twenty conversations I analysed, it was the teacher who decided what the aims of the meeting would be, who would speak, what topics were relevant and the order in which they would be discussed. However, the teacher's role as 'manager' of the conversation was never mentioned explicitly and appeared to be taken for granted by both parties. The talk shown in the excerpt below was typical of many of the conversations recorded.

Excerpt 4.5.a

- 1 T: → OK so first of all ***** I'm gonna look over your test
2 results an' an' then just go through through those quickly
3 so in your year ten exam (.) you got (4.0) ((sound of
4 pages being turned)) a grade D
5 S: yeh=
6 T: =with sixty percent yeh (.) it was quite close to a C but it
7 was a grade D (.) and the last two tests you've done

8 you've been around about the middle to lower end of
 9 grade D with the 'Existence of God' test and the 'Evil and
 10 Suffering' test so that's why on your report I gave you a D
 11 for your attainment because that's where you've been
 12 → operating at in terms of the tests (.) so we need to think
 13 about how we can shift you from a D to a C which is your
 14 target I do believe you're perfectly capable of achieving
 15 → your target (.) if we have a look at your actual classwork
 16 and homework for your classwork I gave you a grade B

In this sequence, the teacher assumed control by selecting the initial topic of conversation (lines 1-2). He also stated what the primary aim of the meeting would be (lines 12-13) and controlled the way in which the conversation moved forward (lines 15-16). By contrast, neither the parent nor the student made substantive verbal responses and did not attempt to introduce topics of their own, even when opportunities to do so occurred. In keeping with the examples I presented in section 4.1, the teacher did most of the talking during the rest of this meeting, delivered mostly in long, unbroken stretches. Moreover, he rarely selected another speaker and so provided little opportunity for the student or his mother to contribute. In fact, he asked only five questions prior to the closing sequence, with all of these being designed to solicit agreement from the student rather than ascertain new information. During his interview, the teacher admitted that this conversation had been one-sided and pointed out that he had given the parent and student few opportunities to contribute. Whilst he stated that he could understand why they

might have been reluctant to speak up during this meeting, he also pointed out that this was not desirable.

I, erm, basically, gave the parents very few opportunities to interact within the conversation, and that, that wasn't necessarily deliberate policy but I could see how, sort of, reflecting on how the conversation had gone, I could see how I basically gave them a monologue. I think I could have improved the conversation by getting them to actually, verbally get involved.

Teacher

The teacher did state, however, that he felt this to have been a successful meeting since the non-verbal feedback (head nodding) he had received showed that his message had been received favourably. During their separate interviews, the parent and student did not seem concerned about their lack of input and stated that they were happy to be passive receivers of information rather than active participants.

I was happy just to sit and listen 'cos I felt that everything he'd said was relevant and was, erm, yeah, was to the point and, you know, he wasn't, if he'd have said something I didn't agree with then I would have said something to him.

Parent

The parent did, however, produce substantive turns at talk at two points in this meeting, both occurring when the teacher appeared to be in difficulty. On each of these occasions, the parent stepped in to support the teacher, thus restoring his 'expert' status and allowing him to resume control of the conversation.

Assuming the right to ask questions

In all of the meetings I analysed, teachers used questions as a means to control conversations. The following example is taken from a meeting in which the student's classroom conduct proved to be the main focus of the conversation.

Excerpt 4.5.b

- 10 T: yes (.) I've noticed in my classroom for example
11 where your bench is that sometimes (.) you're quite (.)
12 → willing to be distracted by other people around you would
13 you say that was a fair comment
14 S: yeah (0.5)
15 T: now Miss ***** said that she's moved you to the front of the
16 → class (1.0) do you think that's improved things
17 S: (1.0) not really
18 T: → why's that
19 S: (1.0) I don't know

20 M: are you still getting involved in others' conversations

21 S: yeah

22 M: even if you're sat at the front ((sounds exasperated))

23 (2.0)

24 T: → what could we do to stop you getting involved in other

25 people's conversations (1.5) I mean bear' bearing in

26 mind that it's fifty-fifty there's other people (.)

27 S: oh [yeah]

28 T: [having] conversations as well we're not saying it's all

29 [your fault]

30 M: [but *****'s] the one to make the choices whether she's

31 gonna answer back an' get involved

32 (3.0)

33 T: → so that's one thing I think we could do isn't it (.) we need a

34 → more focused attitude (.) right

35 S: yeah

During this sequence, the teacher used questions to establish that his assessment was truthful and reasonable (lines 12-13), elicit an admission from the student (line 16), determine the cause of her 'problem' behaviour (line 18), and get her to suggest a solution (lines 24-25). In keeping with the examples I presented in section 4.2, he also used a tag question (line 34) to secure the student's agreement.

During his interview, the teacher readily acknowledged that he had worked to his own agenda during this meeting and that he had offered little opportunity for the parent or student to engage in dialogue. He justified this by pointing out that, in his experience, most students were either unable or unwilling to express their views. Moreover, the teacher explained that, even if he had succeeded in engaging the student, the ensuing talk may not have gone in a direction that he would have wished. He also noted the limited time allocated to each parent-teacher meeting, and stated that this had made him wary of entering into an extended discussion.

This conversation was me just delivering a message with little opportunity for interaction. I often ask the child what they think of the situation, and very few children come back with any meaningful response. There's probably a better way of asking those questions to elicit a more useful interaction, but do I want to have that interaction, bearing in mind I've got five minute slots with each parent and I've got a message to get across?

Teacher

For her part, the student played a subordinate role in this conversation and created no turns of her own. Where the teacher's questions required more than a single-word answer, she made her replies very brief (e.g. line 19). She also delayed her replies, allowing lengthy pauses to develop (lines 17, 19 and 25). Indeed, she did not respond at all to her mother when it appeared that her

turn should naturally follow (lines 22-23). It would thus appear that the student was resisting this line of questioning by providing only minimal responses.

Focusing on information unavailable to parents

Teachers often made the knowledge that they were in possession of – typically effort grades or test results – the focal point of the meeting, thus positioning themselves as the owners and providers of information. Where parents did share their insights or experience regarding a student, this invariably occurred later in conversations on completion of the ‘official’ business relating to academic attainment. The following excerpt is taken from a conversation in which almost all of the talk related to the student’s performance in tests and the ways in which he could improve his grades.

Excerpt 4.5.c

- 1 T: alright then the first thing I’m gonna talk to you about is (.)
2 erm your results record so far (.) so if I just flick through
3 → here I should ha:ve a chart there we have it it’s go:t your
4 results on there up to now >now I’m gonna put< a line
5 across here because your target is an E so I’m gonna put
6 a line right across the chart [there]
7 S: [°yeah°]
8 T: and that is the line that we would hope your test results
9 are landing on so (.) already what I’m gonna say is look at

- 10 your [results there are]
- 11 S: [yeah I've got C's]
- 12 T: five results there that you've got on a C (.) that is fantastic
- 13 (.) also you've got another four that are bang on target
- 14 M: they're these two=
- 15 T: =the two here that are just below target they are for me
- 16 >a bit of a concern< but the latest one we did was back up
- 17 there it was on the target that you should be getting

In this sequence, the teacher physically presented the parents and student with a summary chart showing the student's test results (lines 3 and 4), thus making the knowledge that she had control of the central focus of the conversation from the outset. Moreover, the teacher did almost all of the talking in this meeting and rarely selected the parents or student to speak (cf. excerpt 4.5.a). In fact, she asked only eight questions during the whole of the meeting, with three of these being tag questions designed to obtain agreement (cf. excerpt 4.5.b) and three more used to close the conversation. As for the other examples shown in this section, the teacher addressed her talk almost entirely towards the student, thus placing the parents in the role of bystanders. Indeed, the student's parents take only six turns in this entire conversation, four of these being single-word responses and five occurring during the closing sequence.

During her interview, the teacher accepted that she had done most of the talking and explained this in terms of her concern not to miss anything

important. She pointed out, however, that some parents in other meetings had asked questions, though she noted that these had been in relation to topics that she had already raised.

I did, I kind of, I did bombard them with information, giving them all the information so that, if they were to have any questions, I might have already answered them, yeah, erm, but it actually might have been more helpful if I would have said “What you could do to help is ...”

Teacher

It would thus appear that this teacher felt she had the right to give advice to parents as well as provide information. Moreover, her comment suggests that she saw these parents in terms of the assistance they could provide to further her goal of improving the student’s test grades.

Shared control

In two conversations, the teachers involved were less clearly in control. Both parents and teachers selected topics for discussion and the balance of talk was more even. The circumstances surrounding these meetings, however, could be described as atypical. In one case, the student had very low self-confidence, possibly related to her special educational needs. In the other, the parent in question had herself taught at the school alongside the teacher some years previously. The following excerpt was taken from the former

meeting and took place during a year nine parents' evening (13-14 age range). This event is sometimes referred to as 'options evening' by teachers at the school since the students (and their parents) are soon afterwards required to make a final decision about the examination subjects they will take during the following two academic years.

Excerpt 4.5.d

- 1 T: → yeah so is this conversation we're having is it because
2 you definitely want [to do]
3 S: [definitely]
4 T: the GCSE or are you balancing it up against other
5 subjects
6 M: no it was one of her definites initially
7 T: yeh
8 M: erm there was another one erm she was hoping that this
9 would fit in with her plan [if it could]
10 T: [yeah] and the other way
11 F: ***** goes to engineering club
12 T: OK
13 M: there are (.) it's a possibility=
14 T: → well it I guess it's something that we need to investigate a
15 little bit because erm (.)
16 S: I do my designs on the computer and we use the laser
17 cutter as well

18 T: → an' 'av you tried using it already ['cos]
 19 S: [I've] used it already=
 20 T: → =and are you able to work it the way that you can get the
 21 results that you're after with it does it do everything that
 22 you want it to do
 23 (0.5) ((the student may be nodding her head here))
 24 T: well that's fine because the course that we've run in
 25 school (.) and I choose that one because it gives >people
 26 like *****< the freedom to focus in on one thing that
 27 they (.) like to do

The teacher began by asking a question which appeared designed to ascertain what the purpose of the conversation would be (lines 1-2), and based her subsequent talk on the way in which the parents and the student responded. During this conversation, all of the participants played relatively active roles, with the student creating turns for herself at several points (e.g. lines 16-17). In contrast to the large majority of parent-teacher meetings I analysed (see section 4.1), the teacher made no mention of targets or attainment at any point during this conversation. Additionally, there is little repetition or hesitation and no sign of wariness between the participants, with most turns being delivered in a straightforward, direct manner.

During her interview, the teacher explained that the aim of her opening question was to determine how the rest of the conversation should proceed and pointed out that, unlike parents' evenings with other year groups, the

focus of the year nine event was not on attainment or actions required to improve skills. Indeed, she identified and described four issues that were frequently discussed during year nine parents' evening conversations, these being: how well the parent(s) and student had understood the options process itself; whether or not the examination course would be the most suitable for the student; did the student have the necessary skills to succeed; and likely attainment for the student at the end of the course.

I'm trying to gauge at the beginning whether, well, I suppose there's lots of things involved in that question. Are we just here for the pleasantries? Just a bit of chit-chat? Or is there a question mark over it? If it's a "maybe" at the moment then can we explore what that "maybe" is all about? Sometimes, the parents, and the child as well, they're torn between a couple of subjects that they could be choosing, an', an' I'm trying, I try to start with that initial question because I want to get to the nitty gritty of what we're there to talk about, 'cos it's different for so many students and parents.

Teacher

The teacher's opening question thus appears to have been exploratory in nature and a genuine attempt to establish what issues the parents and student considered to be important so that she could best meet their needs. Of the twenty conversations I analysed in detail, teachers opened with questions only three times (see section 4.1). Perhaps significantly, two of these occurred during 'options evening' meetings involving year nine students. In these

conversations, however, the teachers in question reverted to a one-way delivery of the student's academic progress soon afterwards.

During their separate interviews, both the father and the student described their aims for this conversation, namely to enquire as to the possibility of working with computer software and to determine whether or not the student had the necessary skills to succeed. The father also pointed out that his daughter had special educational needs and this had made him particularly concerned to ascertain whether or not the course would be suitable for her.

I wanted to know, like I wanted to know, like, whether I had, like, a good enough ability or not, whether I could actually do it, because, like, I was still pretty bad at making things. I still am. I just didn't think, like, I possessed enough skill to do it, so, so before I did it I was just, just basically checking

Student

It would thus appear that the teacher had succeeded in addressing the needs of those concerned during this meeting by providing information regarding the examination course and reassuring the student that she had the ability to succeed.

4.6 Friendliness and Support

In this section, I will present evidence to suggest that the parents and teachers in my study worked to support one another and establish or maintain positive relationships. These conversations thus challenge the notion that parents and teachers should be viewed as adversaries.

Considering the feelings of others

In three conversations, the parent or the teacher admitted that they had made a mistake or accepted personal responsibility for some problem. In each of these cases, the speaker's admission was handled with understanding or sympathy. The meeting from which the following excerpt was taken was problematic for the teacher since he had mistakenly reported the student's test result – as opposed to his predicted grade – on the written report sent home to parents the previous week. He therefore began this conversation with an explanation and an apology.

Excerpt 4.6.a

- 4 T: OK I think in class (.) your work (.) is at that level right in
5 your report (bearing in mind) we've started a new system
6 of reports (.) I put down your actual test grade (.) and
7 the grade that you got in your first test was a grade E (.)
8 which was pretty diabolical (.) and that's probably why on

9 the report because your mark was so low this is why the
 10 report was so low what I should have put down was the
 11 mark that you're expected to get at the end of year eleven
 12 M: right
 13 T: → so sorry about that
 14 F: → that's alright
 15 T: it's a pretty low grade though
 16 S: ye:ah I know (.) it's not perfect

Whilst the teacher ostensibly delivered his opening talk to the student – indicated by his use of 'you' and 'your' – both parents responded as if he had been speaking directly to them (lines 12 and 14). It would thus appear that the teacher had been addressing his talk to the student as a means of admitting his mistake to his parents. This appears to be an awkward moment for the teacher and could have led to further questions or criticism. The father, however, accepts the teacher's apology promptly and without further comment (line 14), effectively closing the topic.

The following excerpt provides evidence to show that parents – as well as teachers – were willing to accept responsibility for their shortcomings. This time it was the teacher who responded in a manner to suggest that she was sensitive to the parent's feelings and wished to ease her difficulties.

Excerpt 4.6.b

- 236 M: I could say to him you need to sit at the table so that I
237 → see you doing something (0.5) and I haven't done that (.)
238 you know (.) I'm in the kitchen preparing and I could say
239 → he must be there and (.) erm I could have [done that]
240 T: [>I mean<] do
241 you check his planner you could (.) look in his homework
242 erm planner and see that he's done (.) what he's supposed to
243 do
244 M: ye[ah]
245 T: [just] tick those off (.)
246 M: I check it sometimes ***** checks it sometimes er (.) er:
247 (.) >I mean< (.) was it last year or the year before we said
248 that we wanna s' 'cos he says yes I've done it
249 T: yeh
250 M: in the past I've said well I want to see it as well (.) so no
251 → I'm not doing that so I could do that (.) e:rm I think he
252 needs (.) he needs us to do something 'cos he obviously
253 isn't (.) doing it himself >you know< [dis]ciplining
254 T: [yeh]
255 M: himself organising himself
256 T: → mind you (.) I don't check my planner so sof [ha ha]
257 M: [no:]
258 T: → I always forget

In this case it was the parent who admitted that she was at fault. This can be seen over lines 237, 239 and 251 where she disclosed that she had not monitored her child's homework activity as closely as she could. The teacher, however, responded to this by revealing – in a light-hearted manner – to being poor at checking her own planner (lines 250-254), thus playing down any fault that might have been implied by the parent's admission.

In three conversations, parents and teachers supported one another as they worked to gloss over or make light of student failure. In the excerpt below, the student concerned had performed well below his target level in a recent test, having lost marks due to his illegible handwriting. He had also showed a lack of some basic exam techniques and had put insufficient effort into his revision.

Excerpt 4.6.c

- 33 T: that test you did with me you got a grade D (.) which doesn't
34 reflect your abilities
- 35 F: → what was that about
- 36 T: well it's (.) £funny I've got a present for you£
- 37 F: ha ha
- 38 M: → oh a:y ((mock impressed voice))
- 39 T: there you go this is the test paper (.) without the answers on
40 though
- 41 F: OK

42 T: so

43 S: I've got to do it again

44 T: £yes you've got it in one£

45 F: you've got [to do it again]

46 M: → [(listen to him)] do it again ha ha ha ha d'you

47 know what you are ↑such an intelligent young man↑

48 T: and guess what if you don't get a grade A this time (.)

49 £you'll have to do it again£

In this sequence, both the teacher and the student's parents work to avoid criticism or blame allocation and keep the conversation positive. Following the teacher's reference to the student's disappointing test grade (line 33), the father might have asked some awkward questions. Instead, he responded by making a simple factual enquiry relating to the content of the test paper (line 35), effectively shifting the focus away from the student's poor performance and presenting the teacher with an opportunity to move onto 'safer' ground. However, the teacher did not answer the parent's question at line 35 immediately and instead presented a copy of the test paper to the student in a light-hearted way. The student's mother responded to this in a similar manner, effectively dispelling tension and supporting the teacher by playing down any concerns that she might have had (line 38). Evidence taken from separate interviews with the teacher and the parent suggested that they were both keen to keep this conversation as positive as possible and felt that blame allocation would have been counterproductive. Indeed, the student's mother highlighted

the need to boost her child's confidence and motivate him, pointing out that to place pressure on him to complete homework would have made him unhappy.

It's not a blame thing, an', you know, if [my child] comes out with a grade below what he should be achieving, I don't blame anybody, certainly not ***** or school, erm, and I do think that we have to work together and have, sort of, a discussion about, actually, what can we do, "OK that's gone now, let's be practical. What can we do?"

Parent

Similarly, the teacher pointed out that to place the emphasis on the student's failings could have caused friction between him and his parents. He also mentioned that the student was already well aware of his shortcomings, had been making good progress in some areas and that a conversation based only on the negative aspects of his learning would be unlikely to help matters.

I don't think focusing on [the student]'s test grade would have helped, particularly, 'cos that would have been a very negative conversation, 'cos that would have put the onus very much on [the student], saying "Why aren't you doing very well?" It may be wrong for me to infer this, but if I create a negative atmosphere, when they go away, it's not going to be helpful to anyone, 'cos they could quite easily start getting at the student.

Teacher

It would appear from this that both the parent and teacher were sensitive to the possibility that the student could have become demotivated or disaffected and were keen to avoid being over-critical. The participants did not ignore the problems reported by the teacher, however, since the remainder of this meeting is almost entirely spent delivering advice to the student about how to improve his exam grade.

Seeking common ground

In three conversations, parents described a previous experience or disclosed an aspect of their personal lives that linked them to the teacher's subject area. The teachers involved did not, however, follow up such comments with further enquiry. Indeed, in all three cases the teacher responded with a question or comment directed at the student rather than the parent, thus closing down the topic. The following excerpt was taken from a conversation in which the parents were meeting their child's languages teacher for the first time.

Excerpt 4.6.d

- 65 F: there was an interview that we'd heard (.) you understood
66 something of what was said which was great you weren't
67 → just confused by the Eng' mass of language (.) 'cos I used
68 to teach languages I used to
69 T: yeh
70 F: teach English as a foreign language you just immerse

71 people [in it]
 72 T: [that's] right
 73 F: and get them to pick [out one thing]
 74 T: → [yeah (.) yeah] how do you find the
 75 difference between french and german are you coping OK
 76 with that

In this excerpt, the student's father informed the teacher of his own experience teaching English as a foreign language. The teacher, however, did not necessarily welcome this move since she interrupted him to ask the student a question (line 74), effectively ending any further talk on this topic.

During his interview, the father suggested that parents' evenings were not simply about receiving information regarding his child's learning, but were also a useful way for parents and teachers to get to know one another.

It was the first parents' evening, so it was probably more about getting to find out who the teachers are. I felt it was more of an introduction, to make sure [the student] is settling in and for looking around, for teachers to eyeball the parents as well as for us to, sort of, put, put information across as well.

Parent

In the light of this comment, the parent's disclosure regarding his previous experience as a language teacher could be seen as a friendly gesture

designed to establish a common interest and build good relations with the teacher.

Humour and anecdotes

In three conversations, the parents and teachers worked to build rapport through the use of humour or amusing anecdotes. The following example shows how a teacher and a student worked together to recount an amusing incident that had occurred during a recent biology lesson.

Excerpt 4.6.e

- 59 T: → £did you tell your mum about the [visitor we] had?£
- 60 S: [ah yeah]
- 61 T: the little little year five or six [student came in]
- 62 S: [oh (.) that came] in
- 63 T: £to look around the school£
- 64 S: and there £it was just all of us (.) like dissecting
- 65 eyeballs£
- 66 T: total [carnage]
- 67 M: [ha ha ha]
- 68 T: and this poor kid looked [terrified]
- 69 M: [ha ha ha]
- 70 T: it was like something out of a horror [film]
- 71 M: [ha ha]

- 72 T: it was like ↑please go away↑
- 73 M: ha ha
- 74 T: come back another day [when]
- 75 M: [yeah]
- 76 T: we're doing plants

In this sequence, all of the participants seemed relaxed and there were no signs of tension or wariness. Moreover, the light-hearted way in which both the teacher and the student produced their talk signalled that this was an amusing story, prompting the parent to respond with laughter on the completion of each turn (lines 67, 69, 71 and 73). The impression given here is a positive one, with the participants working to create a friendly atmosphere as an end in itself. The comments made by the teacher during her interview, however, suggest that she had a more practical motive.

Mum's always been really supportive and, erm, well a great parent to work with, erm, but I was particularly worried about [the student] 'cos she's very high ability, she should be an A star and should have had very solid marks across the board, but she didn't. I was trying to get parental support. I was trying to, erm, befriend her, I suppose, to, kind of, keep her on side.

Teacher

It would thus seem that the teacher considered the student likely to underachieve and had been acting strategically to procure parental support.

The teacher did not, however, explicitly state these concerns regarding the student during the conversation and the parent stated several times during her interview that she was not concerned about her daughter's progress in this subject.

Exchanging compliments

In five conversations, parents worked to build friendly relationships by passing on favourable reports they had received from their child with regard to the teacher or the teacher's subject. The following excerpt is taken from a conversation in which the parent appeared keen that her daughter should choose the teacher's subject as an examination course the following year.

Excerpt 4.6.f

- 144 T: erm but normally it's about sort of fourteen to sixteen in
145 a class
146 M: → very good (.) oh no that's good (.) no w' I know she loves her
147 languages [so]
148 T: [oh] brilliant
149 M: er yeah=
150 T: → =she is really good (.) very very hardwork[ing so]
151 M: [aw:] it was
152 worth taking you when you were a baby wasn't it ha ha
153 T: oh yeah and you went to Austria as well on the skiing trip

154 [have]n't
 155 S: [yeh]
 156 T: you so
 157 M: yeah
 158 T: very good

In this conversation, the parent appears to compliment the teacher by stating that her daughter 'loves' languages (lines 146-147). This presents the teacher with a dilemma – to agree would risk appearing boastful, whilst to disagree might seem rude. The teacher's solution was to produce a neutral news receipt – 'oh brilliant' (line 148) – which, whilst expressing her pleasure on receiving this information, also avoided explicit agreement or disagreement. She then followed with a positive comment relating to the student's attitude and effort (line 150), thus switching the focus from herself to the student. This last remark appeared to be taken as a compliment by the parent, who negotiated the same dilemma by responding with mock dismay (line 151).

During her interview, the parent indicated that she saw a direct link between the teacher's professional competence and her child's enthusiasm for the subject.

I just wanted to say to [the teacher] that obviously she must be a good teacher to have, you know, [my child] loves her languages and it's obviously down to [the teacher], you know, who's got her enthused and wanting to do it. In a

way, I just wanted to say, you know, “[my child] really likes you, she thinks you’re a nice teacher”.

Parent

It would thus appear that the parent had been working to deliver a compliment. This may have been intended as a means to establish friendly relations between herself and the teacher. However, there is also the possibility that the parent was acting on behalf of her daughter rather than herself and was working to strengthen the bond between the student and the teacher (cf. excerpt 4.4.g).

Joining forces

Of the eleven conversations in which teachers delivered unfavourable reports, there were four cases in which the student openly expressed disagreement with the teacher’s assessment or resisted the advice that they were being given. In three of these cases, the parents positioned themselves with the teacher in opposition to their child, whilst in one case the parent remained neutral and acted in the role of mediator. The following excerpt was taken from a conversation in which the teacher placed pressure on the student to increase her revision efforts by comparing her to other – academically successful – students.

Excerpt 4.6.g

- 131 T: even if it was a test paper they are (.) erm spending
132 longer than the hour and forty-five on the test paper and
133 going away and looking stuff up and th' they're trying
134 constantly to get full marks [on the practise papers]
135 S: → [yeah I mean I do] do that
136 on the practise papers
137 T: °yeah°
138 S: → I do do that
139 T: but just up the levels a bit

Here, the student explicitly challenged the notion that she was not spending enough time working on practise papers. Moreover, her commencement before the teacher had finished speaking (line 135) and the fact that she repeated her point (line 138) suggests that she had strong feelings about this. Following this response, the teacher appeared to back down and softened her subsequent advice (line 139), though she was not deterred for long and raised the subject again shortly afterwards:

Excerpt 4.6.h

- 167 T: the mocks are making you revise [it's]
168 S: [alright]
169 T: =trying to give you the most [realistic chance possible]

170 M: → [yeah and you don't have] to
171 do as much next year for your actual exams
172 T: yeah it it its ticking over in your head just [regularly]
173 S: [oh alright OK]

Here, the parent steps in to support the teacher (lines 170), thus placing the student under joint pressure. She subsequently accepted the advice being given (line 173), though her 'oh' at the start of this turn suggests that she did so under protest (Heritage, 2004). During her interview, the student commented at length on the suggestion that she had not been working hard enough.

The lecturing bothered me slightly because [the teacher] made it seem to my mum that we hadn't been doing any revision at all, when I knew that I had we'd been doing, like, six hours a week, which is more than [the teacher] told me to do ... and then Mum sided with [the teacher] and it was, like, "You've seen the revision I've been doing, what's going on?"

Student

It would thus seem that the student had felt unfairly challenged by the teacher during this conversation and had been dismayed to find herself isolated rather than supported by her mother.

Tensions were also apparent in the following example, which was taken towards the end of a conversation in which both the parent and teacher had been strongly critical of the student's effort with regard to homework.

Excerpt 4.6.i

- 206 T: if you could improve your effort for this next round of
207 tests (.) then I will be much more happy with this chart
208 next time we talk (.) yeah?
- 209 S: °yep°
- 210 T: OK then any questions or concerns from either of you
- 211 M: no (0.5) [not really]
- 212 T: [no I think] we just about have haven't we alright
213 [then]
- 214 M: [OK] you know how important it is it's down to you
215 (1.5)
- 216 T: → it's down to you
- 217 S: you've said that at every single parents' evening mum it's
218 down to you it's down to you it's down to you ((sounds
irritated))
- 219 T: → she's right though
- 220 M: thank you

The student appears to have lost patience by this point in the conversation, based on his clipped response at line 209, the long pause he allowed to

develop when a reply from him might have been expected (line 215), and the irritation he expressed towards his mother (lines 217-218). As in the previous example, the parent and teacher present a unified front to the student, though this time it is the teacher who supports the parent (lines 216 and 219).

During her interview, the teacher pointed out that, whilst her comments were directed towards the student, she was also delivering a message to the parent.

I think a lot of the things I said, I said for her to witness and to take information from that for her benefit. That way he's held to account by me when he doesn't do it and equally then, because Mum's been witness to that, held to account by his mum as well.

Teacher

This comment is interesting for two reasons. Firstly, her use of the word 'witness' calls to mind the image of a trial, which is what this conversation appeared to be for the student. Secondly, the teacher seemed to think that she would be supported from home by the parent, though neither party had mentioned this explicitly during their conversation.

4.7 Competition and Conflict

In this section, I will present evidence from two conversations – both involving the same parent – in which the parent and teacher appeared to be in opposition. In the first of these, the parent complained about the way in which the teacher had treated her children. In the second, the parent and a different teacher appeared to be contesting control of the conversation.

A parental complaint

During three conversations, parents placed themselves in opposition to the teacher or the school over an issue relating to the education of their child. In one of these meetings, the parent reacted defensively to a critical comment regarding her child's effort, prompting the teacher to change the topic of conversation and so avoid a possible conflict. In another, the parent – a teacher herself – complained about the way her child's progress had recently been reported. Again, the teacher avoided a possible confrontation, this time by agreeing with the parent and suggesting that certain aspects of school policy were in need of review. In the third meeting, however, the teacher did not immediately give way, leading to a lengthy conversation in which both parties argued their case. The following excerpt is taken from the early part of this meeting.

Excerpt 4.7.a

- 65 M: >you know< now (.) they both were really upset (.) erm at
66 the awards night about being told off for not going
67 T: yeah
68 M: now they didn't go because they have this
69 qualification that they do (.) because they were at
70 camp ((a residential event run by a local youth group))
71 T: yeah
72 M: and if they get the qualification they go on the camp
73 T: [yeah]
74 M: [school] was supposed to let them go on the camp (.) and
75 then give them the help with not going to rewards night
76 T: → I think the thing is with rewards night it's one of our
77 biggest nights in the school calendar h erm
78 M: but careerwise for these two
79 T: oh yeah I can understand that >I think what upsets< (.)
80 → well (.) children go through this school an' never get an
81 award (.) as you can understand >you know< these
82 they've been picked out of out of a year group for that
83 particular award and so when ***** >I mean y'< it was a bit
84 when you came to tell [me *****]
85 M: [(it was)] last minute
86 T: right

In this sequence, the parent expressed her dissatisfaction with the harsh way she felt that her children had been treated by the school after they had disclosed that they would not be attending prize night – a high-profile event in the academic calendar in which outstanding students were publicly recognised for their achievement. Indeed, she made it clear that her children had only missed the prize night because they had a competing commitment which was a worthwhile, career-orientated activity in its own right (lines 68-72 and 78). The fact that she made this point repeatedly throughout the conversation (only a small number of the instances are shown here) suggests that she felt strongly about this issue. During her interview, the parent claimed that the teacher had viewed her children's decision only from the school's perspective and had not considered their wider needs.

The prize night's the school's priority, not the children's priority and she didn't show any recognition of the importance, because of their career aspirations, for why they missed. I just wish that she would have said that it was an education opportunity, you know, and that for them it was a career thing and not just a want. I just felt, you know, she needed to acknowledge that it was an education thing.

Parent

For her part, the teacher produced only short, supporting responses whilst the parent was speaking (lines 71 and 73), giving the impression that she was working to keep the situation calm and avoid conflict. After listening to the

parent's complaint, however, she did not immediately offer an apology but attempted instead to justify the school's position. The teacher did this by first highlighting the prize night as a significant event for the school (lines 76-77) and then suggesting that being nominated for an award was an honour given to few children (lines 80-83). She also referred to the fact that the students had left it until the last moment before making known their intention not to attend prize night (lines 83-84), a point conceded by the parent (line 85). Later in the conversation, the teacher again defended her position.

Excerpt 4.7.b

- 111 T: [no] no (.) it was just it was just a feeling it's
 112 it's not just personal to ***** and ***** it is >you know< a
 113 thing at school that we feel prize night an' I think because (.)
 114 well y' it was last minute ***** and ***** >you know< which
 115 is (.) it's not your that it was last minute you were told about it
 116 >but as a school< because (.) we we'd given the letter
 117 like five weeks before an' you knew about prize night you
 118 → know it was sort of a disappointment >because I would
 119 have< loved to have seen you two up there (.) you know
 120 M: we would as well=
 121 T: =you know I mean you know let's let's go on to ***** you
 122 know ***** you know (0.5) absolutely outstanding report an'
 123 I'm not saying yours you ***** >you know< yours is a
 124 → fantastic report >you know< so I think really we we're

125 disappointed that you two weren't gonna be there to pick
 126 your rewar' awards up
 127 M: but we had to we had to prioritise
 128 T: yeah

Here, the teacher again argued her case, this time by pointing out that the students' absence had been particularly disappointing given their outstanding achievements over the year (lines 118-119 and 122-126). She did, however, modify her talk to reduce the risk of confrontation. One way in which she did this was to distance herself from the issue by making it clear that she was speaking on behalf of the school. This was done both explicitly, by inserting 'but as a school' into her turn (line 116), and also implicitly by shifting pronouns from 'I' to 'we' (lines 113, 116 and 124). The teacher also worked to soften her utterances through the use of 'just a feeling' (line 111), 'I think' (line 113), 'like' (line 117) and 'sort of' (line 118). The teacher's talk at this point thus gives the impression that she was treading carefully – confirmed during her subsequent interview when she pointed out that this parent had a reputation amongst the staff for being confrontational. However, the teacher also pointed out that she had strong feelings with regard to this issue and was prepared to stand her ground.

So yeah, I was ready for the confrontational bit, but I think, I mean, I'm quite, passionate about prize night 'cos I feel, over the years, it has wound me up with prize night, it's a personal sort of thing. I hate it when children are blasé

about it, because some kids don't get a prize at prize night an' I wanted to get across how important prize night was.

Teacher

Following this sequence, both parties seem to have made their respective positions clear and the teacher changed the topic of conversation. The issue does not seem to have been resolved, however, since she returned to the subject later in the meeting (lines 225-227).

Excerpt 4.7.c

- 225 T: → yeah but no I'm r' I'm really an' (.) I'm sorry
226 if >you know< you've felt about prize night an' that >you
227 know< you weren't supported but it was just it was just as
228 a school in a whole you were treated the same as
229 everybody else [but]
230 M: [not] very well
231 T: I know an' >you know< that's where (.) I was probably
232 well all of us were probably .hh oh ((sounds like
233 disappointment)) >you know< because we wanted to see
234 you on the stage getting your prizes that you deserved
235 M: she's never missed anything like this before
236 T: she's lovely ↑I know↑ I know I know an' I think I have got
237 your certificates somewhere (.) alright? c'mon eh we'll

238 ‘ave another awards ceremony just for yer
 239 M: [yeah]
 240 S1: [ha ha ha]
 241 S2: [ha ha]

Here, the teacher's apology – characterised by false starts, hedging and repetition – was followed by further justification in terms of her desire to treat all students equally (lines 228-229) and her disappointment that two such worthy students were not getting their due credit on prize night (lines 231-234). Whilst the first of these points was firmly rejected by the parent (line 230), her turn at line 235 was delivered in a more moderate tone and appeared to mark a shift in her position. The teacher also appears to have noted this since her subsequent turn sounded sympathetic (line 236) and was followed by a concession. Shortly after this exchange, there followed a lengthy period of 'reconciliation' during which both the parent and the teacher seemed to be working to repair any damage that might have been caused and restore good relations. During her interview, however, the parent indicated that her complaint had not been resolved to her satisfaction and that the meeting had ended 'politely' rather than amicably.

Contesting control

The parent featured in the excerpts above also appeared to be at odds with a different teacher during her second recorded conversation. This time, however, she appeared to be competing with the teacher for control of the

conversation. The following excerpt shows the teacher putting a series of questions to a student in order to determine the cause of his poor performance in recent science tests.

Excerpt 4.7.d

- 53 was it just a couple of bad tests what d'you reckon
- 54 S: I I think they were just bad tests
- 55 T: right=
- 56 S: =I >it's just like< I sometimes have bad days
- 57 T: yeah
- 58 S: in science I just (.) like
- 59 T: can [I ask]
- 60 M: → [did you] revise
- 61 T: I was about to say can I ask you honestly how much
- 62 preparation d'you think you've done for those
- 63 S: er:m (.) <for> (.) science not a lot

In keeping with the talk presented in section 4.5, the teacher controlled this conversation by putting questions to the student, cutting off his replies, and asserting her right to evaluate or summarise his responses. At line 60, however, this pattern was broken by the parent who interrupted to ask a question of her own, effectively taking control of the conversation. At this point, the teacher stepped in before student could respond and reformulated a longer version of the same question (lines 61-62), thus re-establishing herself

as the person asking the questions. The parent interrupted the teacher to ask a question on three further occasions and at two other points in the meeting they appeared to be competing with each other to complete their turns. Moreover, when the parent did interrupt, she addressed herself to the student rather than the teacher. During her interview, the teacher expressed her dissatisfaction with the way that this parent had spoken towards both her and the student.

She was cutting off the things he said quite often, erm, talking over him. She just, she just didn't seem to really listen to him. I d', I don't actually feel that she listened to me very much either.

Teacher

It would thus appear that, whilst the parent and teacher were in agreement on educational matters, there was a degree of antagonism between them with regard to their conversational roles.

Summary

The reporting of students' attainment, effort or behaviour by teachers was very common and occurred at the start of most conversations. This typically occurred during the early part of meetings and was almost always instigated by the teacher without discussion. Parents accepted this without question and often encouraged the teacher to continue speaking. Some parents also

volunteered relevant information, though this occurred less often and tended to take place only after the teacher's assessment had been completed.

Parents and teachers frequently worked to improve some aspect of a student's learning. This could involve challenging, persuading, reassuring, instructing or advising and occurred in almost every conversation in which the student was present. Whilst teachers usually initiated and led these sequences, parents often endorsed the teacher's message or encouraged the student to comply. Influencing students' study habits or conduct would thus seem to be an important aim for parents and teachers during their meetings.

Both parents and teachers appeared sensitive to the potential for their talk to cause harm. Teachers seemed particularly cautious when reporting problems and adapted both the form and the content of their talk so as to protect the feelings of parents and students. They also used a variety of methods that served to reduce the likelihood that they would be personally held to account for poor educational outcomes. Several teachers, however, rejected the idea that they had deliberately acted to avoid personal harm.

The parents and teachers in my study often constructed their talk in ways that drew attention to their parental or professional competence. Such identity work was never made explicit and tended to occur whilst matters relating to students' academic progress were being discussed. Moreover, when the issue of identity was raised during follow-up interviews, parents and teachers invariably played down the importance of presenting themselves in certain ways or stated that they had done so for the benefit of others.

The teachers in my study appeared to be in control during most parent-teacher meetings. They did most of the talking, decided what the topics of conversation would be and the order in which they would be discussed. Moreover, teachers disregarded the information offered by parents when this appeared to threaten their position as expert. In one conversation, however, the teacher did not impose her own agenda but worked to establish what the parents and student wished to discuss. Parents appeared willing to be led by teachers and did not contest control. However, some stated that they had been reluctant to raise topics where this might have challenged the teacher's authority.

The majority of the parents and teachers in my study worked to avoid conflict and seemed inclined towards mutual support. Teachers tended to gloss over or play down disappointing test results, whilst both parties readily acknowledged their failings and did not hold each other to account. The parents and teachers in my study also established friendly relationships through the use of humour, anecdotes, and compliments. Moreover, when students contested assessments or resisted advice, parents typically supported the teacher rather than their child.

In three conversations, parents complained to the teacher about a school-related issue. In two of these meetings, the teachers involved agreed with the parent or changed the subject, thus avoiding conflict. In one meeting, however, the teacher argued her case, leading to a long conversation in which both parties attempted to justify their position. Towards the end of this

conversation, however, the participants appeared to be working to restore friendly relationships. The same parent also appeared to be in conflict during her second recorded conversation. This time, however, the parent appeared to be competing for control of the conversation rather than complaining over an educational matter.

Chapter 5 – Discussion

Given that my research questions – which are reproduced below – have determined the direction of my study, I will use these as the framework for this chapter.

- What are the parents and teachers at my school trying to achieve when they engage in conversation during parent-teacher meetings?
- How do parents and teachers at my school go about achieving their conversational aims?
- What can the talk observed between the parents and teachers at my school tell me about the nature of their relationships?

Since my first two questions are both concerned with what participants were trying to achieve during their meetings, I will consider these together. My discussion will thus be divided into two major sections, the first being concerned with the aims of participants and the second with parent-teacher relationships. I would point out, however, that talk regarding participants' aims often provided insights into their relationships and *vice versa*, meaning that the two sections overlap – see section 5.1.3. Throughout my discussion, I will link the findings which have emerged from my investigation to the research literature I reviewed in chapter two. For the reasons I outlined in section 3.4.2, I will place particular emphasis on those studies based on the direct observation of parent-teacher meetings. Where appropriate, I will also use the

concept of 'face' and politeness theory (section 2.4) to account for the talk I observed.

5.1 Conversational Aims

This section relates to my research questions concerning the aims of parents and teachers. As I have previously noted (section 2.3.5), Pillet-Shore (2012) has distinguished between the 'official' and 'unofficial' business of parent-teacher meetings. She did not, however, define these terms in detail, thus limiting their usefulness. I have built on Pillet-Shore's thinking by making the distinction between the 'instrumental' and 'interpersonal' aims of participants. Instrumental aims can be defined as those concerned with achieving specific educational outcomes, whilst interpersonal aims relate to the personal needs of parents and teachers as they interact. In the following sections, I will provide examples from the parent-teacher conversations I recorded to further illustrate these meanings.

5.1.1 Instrumental Aims

In the previous chapter, I divided my findings into themes. Of these, two were directly concerned with the instrumental aims of the participants, these being the reporting of students' academic progress (section 4.1), and the influencing of students so as to bring about improved attainment or behaviour (section 4.2). With regard to my first two research questions, I will now compare and

contrast the evidence I presented in each of these sections with the relevant studies in my literature review.

Reporting progress

In section 4.1, I presented evidence to show how the majority of the conversations I analysed began with a sequence in which the teacher reported information to the parent regarding the student's academic progress or behaviour. This was invariably initiated by the teacher, with no prior discussion regarding what the purpose of the meeting should be. Moreover, the teachers involved provided few opportunities for parents to speak, thus placing them in the role of passive recipients of information. Such behaviour suggests that the teachers in my study were seeking to deliver a pre-set agenda to parents rather than engage in meaningful dialogue. Indeed, during their interviews, three teachers evaluated the success of their meetings in terms of whether or not they had got their 'message' across to the parent. Such thinking seems at odds with the notion of communicative action (Habermas, 1984, cited in Tveit, 2007, p. 200-201) or the idea of teachers as learners during parent-teacher meetings (Lemmer, 2012). The parents in my study, however, accepted this pattern of talk without question and in many cases encouraged the teacher to continue speaking. This is perhaps surprising given that these parents would have received the same information in their child's written report just a few days before their meetings took place. It would thus appear that the reporting of student attainment or conduct by teachers – whether useful or not – was tacitly accepted to be the main

'business' of the meeting by both parties. Indeed, when one teacher breached this understanding by asking a parent what she would like to talk about (excerpt 4.1.c), the parent appeared disconcerted and was unable to suggest a topic of her own. I did, however, observe two meetings in which the teachers involved did not deliver an assessment of the student's academic progress or behaviour, though the circumstances surrounding these meetings were atypical – one case involved a particularly anxious student with special educational needs and the other a parent who had previously worked as a teacher at the school. The one-way nature of the communication between the parents and teachers in my study has implications for parent-teacher relationships and school policy which I will consider in sections 5.2 and 6.3 respectively.

The tendency for teachers to transmit information to parents is in agreement with the majority of the research literature based on the direct observation of parent-teacher meetings (Walker, 1998; MacLure and Walker, 2000; Weininger and Lareau, 2003; Lemmer, 2012; Matthiesen, 2015). Lemmer (2012, p.91), for example, has referred to a 'teacher's monologue ... which allowed no room for parent input', whilst MacLure and Walker (2000, p.10) pointed out that parents acted as 'passive receivers of pre-packaged information and advice concerning the child'. Similarly, Inglis (2012, p.88) concluded that parent-teacher meetings 'exist to allow the teacher to transmit information on the pupil'. A similar picture emerges from the wider parental involvement literature – see section 2.2.3 – within which researchers have questioned the existence of genuine partnership between parents and

teachers. Feiler et al. (2006), for example, have suggested that current practices do not facilitate two-way exchange of information between home and school, whilst Hughes and Greenhough (2006, p.471) stated that 'home-school communication can often resemble "one way traffic" which makes little attempt to acknowledge the out-of-school lives of children and their families'. It would thus appear that the transmission of student-related information from teachers to parents is a well-established model for parent-teacher meetings across a wide range of educational contexts. Only Markstrom (2009) has reported conversations in which teachers value the knowledge held by parents and both parties share information relating to the student.

There are several reasons why the parents and teachers in my study – and elsewhere within the research literature – might have assumed, without prior discussion, the roles of providers and receivers of information. Firstly, as I noted in the previous section, Lemmer (2012) has suggested that parents could become conditioned into accepting the one-way nature of communication during parent-teacher conferences by their previous experience as learners. I would add that teachers as well as parents might have preconceived ideas of what parent-teacher meetings should look like – either from their experiences as parents or students, or from their contact with other teachers. Moreover, the lack of training for teachers with regard to home-school relationships (De Bruine et al., 2014) means that the notion of parent-teacher meetings as opportunities for transmitting information to parents might go unchallenged. Support for this idea comes from the four teachers in my study who began by inviting the parent or student to select an

opening topic (section 4.1). Of these, three reverted to the reporting of student's progress soon afterwards, suggesting that the one-way transmission of information was a pattern of talk from which they found it difficult to depart. This pattern of talk, however, is not the only way in which parent-teacher conversations could proceed. It has been argued that parents also possess knowledge that could be usefully shared (MacLure and Walker, 2000; Lemmer, 2012). MacLure and Walker (2000, p.10), for example, have pointed out that parent-teacher meetings 'concern a person whom parents might claim to know better than the teacher'. They noted, however, that parents were unlikely to volunteer such information since this would challenge teachers' authority, an idea I will consider further when I discuss the interpersonal needs of participants in the next section.

A second reason for the tendency for teachers to transmit information relates to the short duration of parent-teacher meetings. Several teachers pointed out that the five minute time allocation often made it difficult for them to keep to appointments, resulting in some parents being kept waiting for long periods. This may have encouraged the teachers in my study to 'rush' through the information that they considered important rather than engage in open-ended dialogue. Support for this idea comes from the teacher involved in excerpt 4.1.c who pointed out that time constraints obliged him to focus on his agenda and 'keep to the script' rather than enquire into the issues of interest to the parent. Further evidence comes from the teachers featured in excerpts 4.3.a and 4.5.b who both referred to the time pressure they felt themselves to be under when speaking to parents and described strategies they used to avoid

overly long meetings. The idea that the conversations between the parents and teachers in my study were influenced by time restrictions is in keeping with much of the literature I reviewed in section 2.3 (Walker, 1998; MacLure and Walker, 2000; Inglis, 2012; Lemmer, 2012). MacLure and Walker (2000, p.10), for example, have noted that teacher assessments were 'quite substantially pre-packaged' and suggested that this was necessary to get through the large number of meetings booked during an evening. Similarly, Lemmer (2012, p.93) has suggested that parent-teacher conversations are 'trivialised due to the inadequate time allotted to interactions', thus limiting opportunities for 'true dialogue'. This thinking has implications regarding the effectiveness of parent-teacher meetings which I will return to in section 6.3.

A further possibility is that professional insecurity might have encouraged some teachers to focus on topics – such as test results or course content – about which they could speak with authority, thus enabling them maintain control. Support for this idea comes from the teacher featured in excerpt 4.5.b who pointed out during his interview that he had been reluctant to open up this conversation – which concerned the student's unwanted behaviour – since the ensuing talk might not have gone in a direction that he would have wished. Further evidence is provided by the teacher involved in excerpt 4.2.a who disclosed during his interview that he had felt embarrassed about incidences of misbehaviour in his lessons, causing him to focus on delivering assessment information to the parent and providing subject-related advice to the student. The one-way flow of information during the parent-teacher conversations I recorded could thus be considered as a strategy used by teachers to avoid

unknown and potentially harmful subjects. This would be consistent with those researchers who have viewed parent-teacher meetings in adversarial terms (MacLure and Walker, 2000; Weininger and Lareau, 2003) – see section 2.3.3. Moreover, Tveit (2009) – see section 2.3.5 – found that teachers were more likely to focus on problem-free topics and less likely to engage in open-ended dialogue with parents when there was the potential for disagreement. I will return to the notion of conversational control as a protective measure later in this section and also when I discuss parent-teacher relationships in section 5.2.

Influencing students

There were a number of conversations in my study in which teachers – supported by parents – went beyond the communication of information and worked to improve some aspect of the student's learning or behaviour. This was made explicit by the parent featured in excerpts 4.2.d and 4.2.e who pointed out that she was concerned about her child's behaviour during certain lessons and had wished to 'move him forward' during her meetings with his teachers. Attempts to influence students could take a variety of forms, including challenges to their behaviour or attitude (excerpt 4.2.a), persuasive talk aimed at increasing their effort (excerpts 4.2.b and 4.2.c), technical instruction or general advice to improve attainment (excerpts 4.2.d and 4.2.e), and reassurance or confidence boosting (excerpts 4.2.f-h). This pattern of talk could be observed in almost all of the meetings in which the student was present, regardless of the age, gender or social background of the

participants. Teachers invariably initiated and led these sequences, with parents providing encouragement. In some cases, however, parents participated more actively and intervened to endorse or extend the teacher's message as the sequence progressed (excerpt 4.2.b). Indeed, some parents went further than the teacher and adopted a highly critical stance towards their children (excerpts 4.2.a, 4.5.b and 4.7.d). I will consider these cases in more detail when I discuss harm avoidance in section 5.1.2.

Attempts by parents and teachers to influence students does not appear to have been reported within the literature I reviewed in chapter two, though Walker (2002) – see section 2.3.1 – hinted at this when she pointed out that some teachers saw parent-teacher meetings as useful opportunities to discipline students. Such patterns of talk stand in contrast to the researchers I noted in section 2.2.3 (e.g. Hornby and Lafaele, 2011) who have suggested a lack of involvement from parents. My findings also challenge those researchers I reviewed in section 2.3 who have described parent-teacher meetings only in terms of the transmission of information by teachers (Walker, 1998; Inglis, 2012; Matthiesen, 2015) or focused on opposition between parents and teachers (MacLure and Walker, 2000; Weininger and Lareau, 2003). Given the problems associated with parent-teacher meetings and the potential for conflict highlighted by these researchers, this joint action by the parents and teachers in my study was unexpected. Moreover, this behaviour raises questions about the way in which Epstein's typology can be used to categorise parent-teacher conversations. As I noted in section 2.1, Epstein et al. (2002) divided parental involvement into six categories, these being

parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and community collaboration. Since parent-teacher meetings provide an opportunity for the exchange of information between home and school, they have typically been considered as type 2 involvement (communication). In almost all of the conversations I recorded, however, the adult participants also attempted to modify student behaviour. Whilst these attempts were typically led by teachers, parents invariably provided assistance. Such behaviour by parents might thus be more accurately described as type 3 involvement (volunteering). Indeed, two parents explained during their interviews that communication was of secondary importance since they had received a written report from the school beforehand and had felt well-informed prior to their meeting.

Sequences of talk in which parents and teachers attempt to influence students have not been reported by the researchers whose work I reviewed in section 2.3 and there are several reasons why this could be. Firstly, this pattern of talk can only occur when the student is present, as in all but two (90%) of the twenty conversations I analysed in detail. This does not appear to be the case, however, in many other schools (Symeou, 2003; Weininger and Lareau, 2003; Markstrom, 2011; Inglis, 2012; Lemmer, 2012; Cheatham and Ostrosky, 2013; Matthiesen, 2015; Pillet-Shore, 2016), meaning that this behaviour could not have been observed by most of the researchers whose work I have reviewed. Moreover, for those studies in which students were allowed to accompany their parents (MacLure and Walker, 2000; Tveit, 2009), the proportion of conversations in which they were actually present was somewhat lower than

that for my study (55% for MacLure and Walker, 41% for Tveit). Whilst not precluding the possibility of concerted action to influence students, this would make the detection of such behaviour less likely. A second reason relates to the nature and current circumstances of the school in which my study took place (section 3.3). It could be argued, for example, that falling rolls had placed the staff under pressure to achieve good examination results in order to attract new students, and that this could have resulted in patterns of talk that would not have occurred in other contexts. It is also possible that changes to educational policy since the last study conducted in an English secondary school (MacLure and Walker, 2000) could have altered the nature of the parent-teacher talk I recorded. According to Gillard (2011), increased parental control of school decision-making and stronger inspection regimes have reinforced existing market-based legislation. Again, this may have placed the parents and teachers in my study under pressure to gain the best possible academic performance from students. A further possibility is that the conceptual frameworks used by some researchers (MacLure and Walker, 2000; Weininger and Lareau, 2003) – see section 2.3.3 – meant that joint action by parents and teachers was less likely to have been observed. Weininger and Lareau (2003), for example, utilised the notion of social reproduction to explain how middle-class parents worked to secure educational advantages for their children, an approach which would place the emphasis on conflict between parents and teachers rather than collaboration to improve students' learning.

5.1.2 Interpersonal Aims

In chapter four, I presented examples of harm avoidance (section 4.3), identity management (section 4.4), conversational control (section 4.5) and mutual support (section 4.6). As for the findings I discussed in the preceding section, these also relate to my research questions regarding the aims of parents and teachers. I would suggest, however, that they are concerned with their interpersonal rather than instrumental aims. I will now consider these findings in the light of the research literature I reviewed in chapter two, again placing the emphasis on those studies based on the direct observation of parent-teacher meetings.

Avoiding harm

The evidence I have presented in section 4.3 suggests that the participants in my study – particularly teachers – were sensitive to the potential for their talk to cause harm. Indeed, interactional work which served to protect the speaker or avoid hurting the feelings of others occurred extensively in almost every conversation I analysed. For their part, the teachers in my study seemed uncomfortable when criticising aspects of students' learning or suggesting corrective action, their talk often being accompanied by delay, hesitation or repetition. The teacher involved in excerpt 4.3.c, for example, delivered a lengthy preamble relating to the student's previously good attitude to learning before addressing the problem of his recent effort and attainment. The teachers in my study also adopted a wide range of strategies which served to

avoid criticism or deter challenges (section 4.3). The teacher involved in excerpt 4.3.b, for instance, held back her comments regarding the student's personal qualities until after the parent had first of all stated her opinion. The parents in my study also appeared reluctant to raise problems and worked to play down issues that might cause conflict or undermine the teacher's authority. In the conversation from which excerpt 4.2.a was taken, for example, the parent stated that she had chosen not to mention an incident of misbehaviour involving her child, despite her concerns. Moreover, when parents did raise problems, this tended to take place at a relatively late point in the conversation and was often delivered hesitantly, with repetition or laughter.

My findings are in agreement with those studies reviewed in section 2.3 which have suggested that teachers are particularly likely to act defensively when they meet with parents (Walker, 1998; MacLure and Walker, 2000). Walker (1998, p.172), for instance, has reported that teachers 'tried to soften the blow for parents of weak students' and were 'loath to say that a student was failing'. Moreover, some researchers have described specific strategies used by teachers to avoid harm (Tveit, 2009; Cheatham and Ostrosky, 2011; Markstrom, 2011). For example, Tveit (2009), has noted that teachers often favoured tact over truthfulness and focused on the positive whilst glossing over or ignoring problems. More recently, Pillet-Shore (2016) has described how teachers avoided assigning responsibility for poor attainment to students or played down failure so as to avoid conflict with parents. The fact that I found less evidence to support the notion of parents acting defensively is also

in accordance with my review of the literature. Indeed, of the researchers whose work I considered in section 2.3, only two have presented evidence of parents acting to avoid harm (Matthiesen, 2015; Pillet-Shore; 2015).

Matthiesen (2015), pointed out that some parents chose not to speak up through a wish to avoid antagonising the teacher, whilst Pillet-Shore (2015) described how parents forestalled criticism by being the first to refer to student shortcomings. It may be, however, that the smaller body of evidence relating to parental behaviour reflects a tendency for researchers to focus on the actions of teachers rather than any real differences between the two groups.

Politeness theory (Brown and Levinson, 1987) – itself based on the concept of ‘face’ (Goffman, 1967) – provides a useful way to explain the occurrence in my study of talk which served to avoid harm. As I noted in section 2.4, these ideas have been previously referred to by both Tveit (2007; 2009) and Pillet-Shore (2015; 2016). I would argue, however, that these researchers have not fully explored the potential for politeness theory to explain the interactions which take place during parent-teacher meetings. Tveit used the concept of ‘face’ to explain why the teachers in her study tended to act tactfully, though she did not extend her thinking to include politeness theory (section 2.3.5). By contrast, Pillet-Shore has mentioned both ‘face’ and ‘politeness’ when explaining how parents and teachers worked to minimise conflict. However, she appears to have played down the importance of *a priori* theory, possibly due to the restrictions associated with her chosen methodology (section 3.5). Given the high proportion of talk I observed which appeared designed to avoid

harm (section 4.3), I would suggest that a theoretical approach based on the concepts of 'face' and 'politeness' deserves greater recognition.

As I noted in section 2.3.5, Pillet-Shore (2015; 2016) has pointed out that the reporting of student shortcomings could be seen as tantamount to criticism of parents, and that seeking the cause of educational failure might challenge the professional competence of teachers. According to Brown and Levinson (1987) – see section 2.4, these actions would constitute a threat to the positive 'face' of those involved, whilst attempts to impose solutions would threaten their negative 'face'. The cautious talk I observed in my study might therefore be viewed in terms of politeness strategies which serve to avoid such threats. The teacher in excerpt 4.3.f, for example, delivered his talk with repetition and hedging before going on to attribute the cause to circumstances beyond the student's control, thus mitigating any loss of 'face' for the student or her parents. This interpretation is supported by the teacher who revealed during his interview that the student's special educational needs had caused him to tread more carefully than usual. The parents and teachers in my study also acted to protect their own 'face'. In excerpt 4.3.e, for example, the teacher did not answer the parent's question, possibly since a direct response may have reflected negatively on her professional competence. Less often, parents and teachers performed face-threatening acts implicitly – described by Brown and Levinson (1987) as 'off-record' strategies. The parent who advocated on behalf of her child (section 5.1.1), for example, did not make her request directly but instead merely raised the possibility that her child might be dyslexic.

The parents and teachers in my study appeared less cautious when it came to threatening the 'face' of students. The teacher in excerpt 4.3.a, for example, asked the student to first of all comment on his own progress before going on to deliver her assessment. During her interview, she explained that this was a strategy designed to quickly establish the student's lack of effort and so avoid an unduly long meeting. However, this strategy also obliged the student to speak on a topic about which he seemed to feel uncomfortable, thus threatening his negative 'face' (section 2.4). Such behaviour is consistent with MacLure and Walker (2000, p.9) – see section 2.3.3 – who have described an 'inquisitorial' dialogue between teachers and students, and seems analogous to the way in which teachers encouraged parents to be the first to report student failings (Pillet-Shore, 2015) – see section 2.3.5. Brown and Levinson (1987, p.76) have suggested that the 'seriousness' of a face-threatening act is reduced when the social distance or the social status between individuals is small. The teacher's behaviour could thus be accounted for in terms of her familiarity with the student and his lower standing within the school. The preference for the parents and teachers in my study to threaten the 'face' of students is also apparent in their attempts to influence student behaviour. The pressure that both the parent and the teacher brought to bear on the student in excerpt 4.3.d, for example, implied that her current levels of effort were not good enough – a threat to her positive 'face' – and also placed her under an obligation to work harder in the future – threatening her negative 'face'. This has implications for parent-teacher relationships which I will discuss in section 5.2.3.

When I suggested during my interviews with parents and teachers that they had been acting to defend their 'face' they typically played down or rejected this idea – in some cases strongly – and provided alternative and equally plausible explanations of their own. The teacher whose talk I presented in excerpt 4.3.a, for example, disagreed with the suggestion that she had been acting defensively to reduce the risk of being challenged by the parent, explaining that she had asked the student to speak first as a practical way to avoid an overly long conversation and so reduce time pressure. Given her long list of appointments and the way in which she attempted to close down the conversation towards the end of the meeting, this seems to be a plausible explanation. It is possible, however, that she had offered this explanation during her interview in order to present herself in a certain way (Cameron, 2001). She may, for example, have considered the self-interested avoidance of harm to be inconsistent with her notions of professionalism. Such identity work would be in keeping with the tendency for the parents and teachers in my study to present 'strong' versions of themselves to one another (section 4.4) during their meetings. Other teachers in my study also offered alternative accounts for their apparently defensive behaviour, with several suggesting that they had framed their talk cautiously for the benefit of parents and students rather than themselves. The teacher featured in excerpt 4.3.f, for instance, explained during his interview that he had been sensitive to the possibility of upsetting the parents of a student with learning difficulties and so had modified his talk accordingly. This is in agreement with Tveit (2009) – see section 2.3.5 – who found that the teachers in her study favoured tact over

truthfulness when discussing problem issues and justified this in terms of protecting the feelings of parents and students.

Managing identity

The parents and teachers in my study seemed concerned to present themselves to one another in a positive light. Parents, for example, often volunteered information regarding educational activities that they had undertaken with their child or pointed to learning materials that they had made available. This can be seen in excerpt 4.4.a, when the parent informs the teacher that he had been watching foreign language films with his child. MacLure and Walker (2000, p. 20) have described such sequences of talk as attempts by parents to 'increase or reclaim their share of power', though this seems at odds with the way in which the parent worked to build friendly relations with the teacher elsewhere in the conversation. I would suggest instead that he was attempting to establish himself as a parent who was interested in the teacher's subject and who actively supported his child's learning. For their part, teachers also worked to present favourable identities and frequently described aspects of their classroom practice that showed them to be proficient or hardworking. In excerpt 4.4.d, for instance, the teacher explained to the student that she strictly adhered to the exam board guidelines when marking test papers. Whilst this may have reassured the student, it also served to establish the teacher as a thorough professional. The teachers in my study also defended their identity at points where this appeared to be threatened. In excerpt 4.4.c, for example, the parent recommended an

educational resource to her child. This prompted the teacher to first of all evaluate the parent's suggestion and then confirm her expert status by making it clear that she regularly used the resource in question herself. The prevalence of identity work in my study is consistent with the research I reviewed in section 2.3 (MacLure and Walker, 2000; Weininger and Lareau, 2003; Pillet-Shore, 2004, 2012; Matthiesen, 2015), as well as the wider parental involvement literature (Day et al., 2006; Cohen, 2008). For instance, Pillet-Shore (2004) has reported how, during opening sequences, parents established their worth by recounting the difficulties they had overcome to get to the meeting.

The notion of 'face' (Brown and Levinson, 1987) – see section 2.4 – provides a possible explanation for the prevalence of identity-related talk in the conversations I analysed. According to Brown and Levinson, the approval of others can be considered as an aspect of positive 'face' and is a basic need for all individuals when they engage in social interaction. In presenting positive versions of themselves to one another, it could thus be argued that the parents and teachers in my study were attempting to boost their positive 'face'. Moreover, in some cases, identity work appeared to have been used to boost the 'face' of others. The teacher in excerpt 4.4.e, for example, not only enhanced her own positive 'face' by showing that she maintained high professional standards but also that of the student by validating her previous test scores. This teacher stated during her interview that she had also been working to persuade the parent that her daughter was in 'safe hands'. Pillet-Shore (2015) has used the concept of 'face' to interpret identity work in a

different way. As I explained in section 2.3.5, she has shown that parents guard against the possibility that they will be held accountable by being the first to raise problems and then pointing out their attempts to remedy the situation. Seen in this light, the way in which the parents and teachers in my study worked to present 'strong' versions of themselves could be regarded as a defensive measure which served to deter challenges or deflect blame. The parent featured in excerpt 4.4.f, for example, made it clear that she was willing to provide her child with whatever educational resources she required, implying that her daughter's limited progress was not due to neglect on her part. Pillet-Shore's notion of pre-emptive action also raises the possibility that the parents in my study were acting strategically when they worked to establish positive identities for their children. The parent involved in excerpts 4.4.g and 4.4.h, for instance, repeatedly pointed out that her daughter enjoyed the teacher's subject and was pleased to be making such good progress. In doing so, she may have been working to enhance the teacher's opinion of her child and so strengthen the relationship between them.

It was not possible to establish from transcript evidence alone that the parents and teachers in my study were engaging in identity work in order to deflect blame from themselves or secure personal advantage. Moreover, when the issue of identity was raised during interviews, parents and teachers tended to play down the importance of presenting themselves in a positive light or suggested that they had only engaged in identity work for the benefit of others. The teacher in excerpt 4.4.b, for instance, stated that her endorsement of the parent's suggestion was intended to encourage the student and discounted

the idea that this was an attempt to re-establish herself as the subject expert. As I noted earlier in this section, the parents and teachers in my study disagreed when I raised the possibility that they had been acting to avoid personal harm during their conversations. Similarly, they also rejected the notion that they were working to present positive versions of themselves to one another. This similarity might be expected given the notion of identity work as a defensive strategy used to deflect blame (Pillet-Shore, 2015). As I have previously noted, however, it is possible that the parents and teachers in my study were also working – not necessarily consciously – to create positive identities for themselves during their interviews (Cameron, 2001) and so were reluctant to speak to me candidly on this subject.

Conversational control

The teachers in my study typically set the agenda (excerpt 4.5.a), did most of the talking (excerpt 4.1.b) and maintained their right to be the person asking the questions (excerpt 4.5.b). They also tended to focus on the knowledge that they possessed, often producing documentary evidence such as mark books or samples of students' work to support their claims. In excerpt 4.5.c, for example, the teacher presented a summary chart showing the student's test results and made this the central focus of her assessment. This is consistent with a number of the studies I reviewed in section 2.3 (Walker, 1998; Inglis, 2012; Matthiesen, 2015). For their part, most parents did not contest the teacher's assumed right to control the conversation (excerpt 4.5.a) and often adopted a supporting role (excerpt 4.2.a) or played a minor part in

the conversation (excerpt 4.5.c). When they did speak, this was often directed at their child rather than the teacher (excerpt 4.7.d), meaning that many conversations contained little dialogue between the adult participants. Moreover, when parents attempted to select topics of their own, volunteer information or put questions to the student, the teachers in my study acted to re-establish their control. In the conversation from which excerpt 4.2.a was taken, for example, the parent made several attempts to raise the issue of her child's behaviour during lessons – an issue which she revealed during her interview had been causing her concern. On each of these occasions, however, the teacher steered the talk back towards the student's current progress or technical advice on the ways in which he could improve his attainment. Similar behaviour has been previously reported by both MacLure and Walker (2000) and Matthiesen (2015) – see section 2.3. Matthiesen (2015, p.10), for instance, has noted that teachers have the right to 'change the focus of the conversation at their discretion', thus restricting the choice of topics available to parents.

As I noted in section 2.3 of my literature review, some researchers have accounted for the high degree of control exercised by teachers in terms of power differences between the participants (MacLure and Walker, 2000; Weininger and Lareau, 2003; Matthiesen, 2015). MacLure and Walker (2000, p.7), for example, have used the notion of 'disciplinary power' (Foucault, 1977, cited in MacLure and Walker, p.7) to interpret the behaviour of the participants in their study. There are, however, several possible alternative explanations. Firstly, the limited time allocated to each parent-teacher meeting may have

caused some teachers to focus on delivering their 'message' rather than encouraging more open-ended exchanges. The teacher whose talk is presented in excerpt 4.5.b, for example, pointed out that he had not engaged in dialogue with the student since this could have resulted in a queue of parents waiting for their turn. This is in agreement with those researchers – see section 2.3 – who have noted that the duration and frequency of parent-teacher meetings may limit their effectiveness (Walker, 1998; MacLure and Walker, 2000; Inglis, 2012; Lemmer, 2012). Secondly, it is possible that the participants in my study may have become so familiar with the notion that teachers should control parent-teacher meetings that they did not question this arrangement. This is consistent with Lemmer (2012, p.94) who has suggested that the parents in her study were 'socialised' into certain patterns of behaviour through their previous experience as learners. A further possibility is that the control of conversations by teachers was a defensive strategy designed to restrict the talk to topics on which their authority was unlikely to be questioned. This idea is supported by the teacher involved in excerpt 4.3.e who explained that a recent confrontational encounter between herself and the parent had made her keen to avoid topics that might lead to disagreement. Similarly, the teacher involved in excerpt 4.3.a stated during her interview that she had felt anxious about challenging the student and so had used a summary chart showing his test results to support her claims.

Friendliness and support

Far from being disapproving or judgemental, the parents and teachers in my study readily forgave transgressions (excerpt 4.6.a), appeared willing to accept responsibility for their shortcomings (excerpts 4.6.a and 4.6.b), and played down educational failure (excerpt 4.6.c). When the parent in excerpt 4.6.b accepted responsibility for her child's poor homework record, for example, the teacher responded in a manner to indicate that she was sensitive to the parent's feelings and wished to support her. Conversely, when the teacher involved in excerpt 4.6.a apologised for having made a mistake, the parent accepted this apology in a manner which indicated that this had not caused a problem and so avoided a potentially uncomfortable moment for the teacher. In the majority of the conversations I analysed, the parents and teachers also worked actively towards building rapport or establishing friendly relationships. In excerpt 4.6.e, for example, the teacher, supported by the student, created a positive atmosphere by recounting an amusing anecdote to the parent. Moreover, where disagreement occurred between the teacher and the student, parents tended to support the former (excerpts 4.6.g-4.6.i). This suggests that the parents and teachers in my study were able to overcome the tensions and differences inherent to their own relationships – see section 2.2.5 – in order to pursue improved outcomes for students.

The tendency for the parents and teachers in my study to support one another and foster friendly relationships has not been widely reported in the literature – see section 2.3 – though Pillet-Shore (2004, pp.14-16) has described how the

parents and teachers in her study created opportunities to 'affiliate and align' by offering an external problem as a focus for joint complaint. Indeed, the behaviour of the participants in my study raises questions for those researchers who have considered parents and teachers as antagonists (MacLure and Walker, 2000; Weininger and Lareau, 2003; Matthiesen, 2015), a point I will return to in section 5.2. However, the tensions which emerged between parents and students (excerpts 4.6.g-4.6.i) are in agreement with Markstrom (2013, p.50) who has described how the students in her study felt nervous or uncomfortable about the possibility that their parents and teachers might 'gang up' on them in order to influence their home or school life. I would add that the divisions between parents and students which emerged during my research call into question the notion of parents and their children as a single social entity (Pillet-Shore, 2012) – see section 2.3.5. This discrepancy may be due to the fact that my study was based within a secondary school whereas Pillet-Shore focused on parent-teacher meetings in the primary sector. The students in my study were therefore older and so would have acquired greater independence and autonomy (Walker, 1998; Catsambis, 2001).

I have already suggested that the participants in my study might have been working to establish 'strong' identities for themselves or control conversations in order to deter challenges or deflect blame. The 'friendliness' of the parents and teachers in my study could be regarded in a similar light. Brown and Levinson (1987) have suggested that sharing laughter, exchanging compliments and establishing common ground all serve to boost the positive

'face' of those involved. From this perspective, the supportive or friendly behaviour of the parents and teachers in my study could be viewed as a pre-emptive strategy used to make conflict less likely or to offset future harm. Evidence to support this notion comes from the teacher whose talk is featured in excerpt 4.6.e. In this sequence, the teacher created a friendly atmosphere by relating an amusing anecdote to the parent, though this did not appear to serve any direct educational purpose. During her interview, however, the teacher explained that she had been attempting to 'befriend' the parent so as to secure her cooperation in pushing the student to work harder at home. The parents in my study might also have been working to achieve their strategic aims when supporting teachers or working to establish friendly relations. The parent featured in excerpt 4.2.a, for example, reinforced the teacher's message by threatening her child with sanctions if he did not comply. It could be argued that this would have placed the parent in a stronger position to request favourable treatment in return, as indeed she did later in the conversation. It is also possible that the parents in my study might have been acting in this way on behalf of their children. In excerpt 4.6.f, for example, the parent conveyed her daughter's enthusiasm for the subject and high regard for the teacher. This behaviour seems similar to the way in which parents presented positive identities on behalf of their children – see earlier in this section – and could be explained in similar terms.

5.1.3 Overlapping Aims

In order to address my first two research questions, I have made the distinction between the instrumental and interpersonal aims of the participants in my study. I would argue that these categories are useful since they raise the possibility that the talk which takes place during parent-teacher meetings may not be entirely directed towards improving educational outcomes for students – a point I will expand on in section 7.2. It is possible, however, that the instrumental and interpersonal aims of participants may overlap – talk designed to meet the instrumental aims of participants could also serve to satisfy their interpersonal needs and *vice versa* – see figure 3.

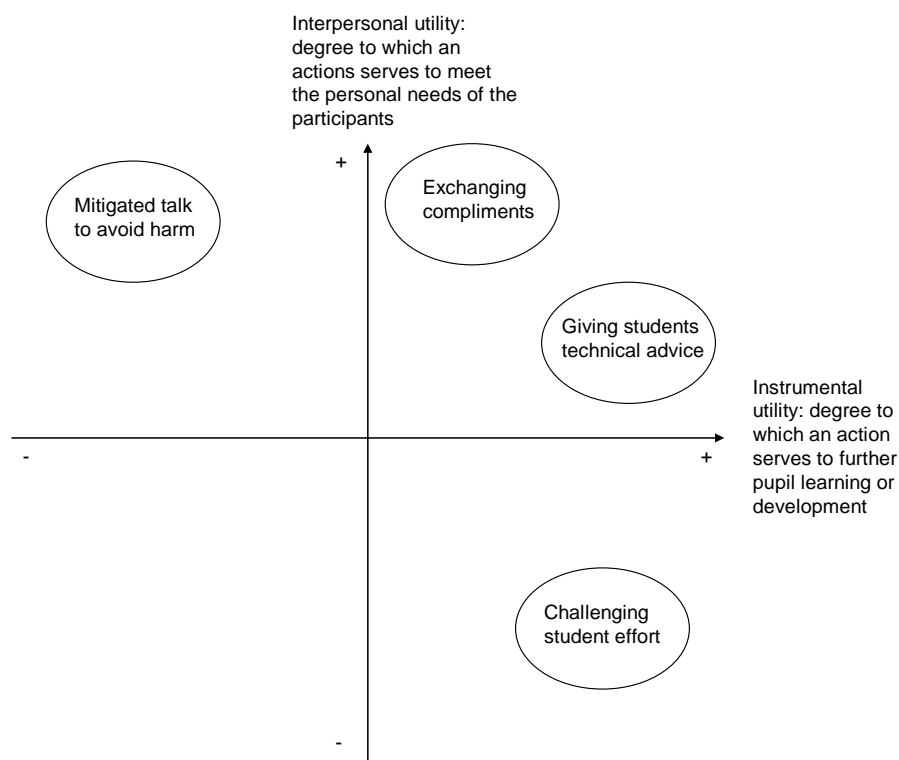


Figure 3: The nature of participants' aims

As figure 3 shows, some sequences of talk can be clearly assigned to one category or another. Challenging students about their effort or behaviour (section 4.2), for example, might comply with the instrumental aims of teachers, but undermine their interpersonal need to avoid harm. Conversely, the tendency for teachers to mitigate their talk (section 4.3) might satisfy their need to avoid hurting the feelings of others but be detrimental to the academic progress of pupils. Other sequences of talk, however, might serve to meet both the instrumental and interpersonal aims of participants, though not necessarily in equal measure. The technical advice given by teachers to help improve students' learning (section 4.2), for instance, could be considered as an instrumental strategy since this is directed towards improving student attainment. Such sequences, however, also provide teachers with the opportunity to present themselves as competent professionals, thus meeting their interpersonal needs. Similarly, those parents and teachers who exchanged compliments (section 4.6) might have done so for primarily interpersonal reasons, though this behaviour could also be seen as an 'investment' of goodwill and so instrumental in nature. I would thus suggest that, whilst the distinction between the instrumental and interpersonal aims of participants provides a useful framework for discussion, the reality may not be so straightforward.

5.2 Parent-Teacher Relationships

This section relates to my research question concerning the nature of the relationships between the parents and teachers in my investigation. I noted in

chapter two that ‘partnership’, ‘expert’, ‘consumer’ and ‘adversarial’ models have been used by different researchers to account for parent-teacher interaction (sections 2.2.2 – 2.2.4). I will now consider how my research findings support or undermine each of these differing perspectives. For a more detailed discussion, see Bilton, Jackson and Hymer (2017a).

5.2.1 Equal Partners

The nature of partnership

According to the ‘partnership’ model for parent-teacher interaction (section 2.2.3), parents and teachers share power equally and take joint responsibility for the education of students (Henderson and Mapp, 2002; Weiss et al., 2009; Wanat, 2010). Parents and teachers should also agree mutually beneficial goals (Epstein, 1987; Weiss et al., 2009), recognise and value one another’s expertise (Henderson and Mapp, 2002; Warin, 2009), and engage in meaningful, two-way dialogue (Cox, 2005; Harris and Goodall, 2007).

Moreover, the notion of parents and teachers as equal partners appears to be widely accepted – and in some cases actively promoted – by both researchers with an interest in parental involvement (Henderson and Mapp, 2002; Weiss et al., 2009) and teachers within schools (Cohen, 2008; Hawes, 2008). However, my research has generated little evidence to suggest that the parents and teachers in my study acted as partners, in keeping with those researchers who have noted a gap between the rhetoric of partnership and the reality of educational practice (Hughes and Greenhough, 2006; Hornby and Lafaele,

2011). Indeed, of the twenty conversations I analysed, only two contained sequences of talk that could be described in these terms. I will now focus on these two cases in greater detail, taking into consideration the background context of each, before discussing the evidence which emerged from my study to challenge the notion of parents and teachers as equal partners.

Supporting evidence

The conversation from which excerpt 4.5.d was taken did not follow the pattern of talk I observed in most other meetings. The teacher did not impose her agenda or steer the talk towards topics of her choosing, but instead attempted to establish what the parents and student thought the purpose of the meeting should be and then respond to their needs. This conversation thus stands in contrast to the findings of Walker (1998), who has pointed to a conflict of agendas and a tendency for teachers to impart information rather than ask parents for their opinion. The teacher also appeared to welcome information volunteered by the parent and actively encouraged him to continue before endorsing his main point. This is in keeping with Markstrom (2009) who has reported that parents and teachers pooled their differing knowledge regarding the student. Such behaviour calls into question the notion that teachers play down or ignore information volunteered by parents or control conversations by shifting the focus away from parental concerns (MacLure and Walker, 2000; Lemmer, 2012; Matthiesen, 2015). It does, however, fit the description of equal partnership based on shared goals between parents and teachers (Epstein, 1987), and is in keeping with the

notion of two-way exchange of information between home and school (Cox, 2005; Harris and Goodall, 2007), in which parental knowledge is recognised and valued (Warin, 2009). I would argue, however, that the circumstances surrounding this conversation were unusual. As I noted in section 4.5, this meeting took place during a year nine 'options evening'. The teacher might thus have been expected to place less emphasis on the reporting of academic progress and more time responding to questions from parents regarding the nature of examination courses or the suitability of the student. Moreover, the special educational needs of the student involved in this conversation had made her particularly anxious about which subject options she would be able to take and it seems likely that the teacher would have been keen to address these concerns.

I found one other conversation – see section 4.5 – in which the relationship between the parent and teacher could be described in terms of partnership. In this meeting, the pattern of turn taking was markedly different to any other conversation I analysed, with the parent and teacher having an almost equal share of the talk and turns from both participants being short and of similar length. The impression given was thus one of an informal conversation between friends, rather than the more one-sided exchanges which occurred in the majority of the meetings I analysed. This conversation thus calls into question the notion that teachers do far more of the talking during parent-teacher meetings (Symeou, 2003; Cheatham and Ostrosky, 2013) – see section 2.3.4. The teacher was also less clearly in control during this meeting, with the parent introducing topics of her own at several points. This challenges

the idea that teachers have an 'acknowledged right to hold the floor at the outset' (MacLure and Walker, 2000, p.21) or that parents have 'a far smaller scope of participatory possibilities' (Matthiesen, 2015, p.8). Again, however, the context surrounding this conversation might be considered unusual. In this case, the parent in question had previously rendered valuable assistance during extra-curricular activities and the teacher appeared keen to ensure that this continued. In MacLure and Walker's (2000) terms, this would have shifted the balance of power towards the parent, thus allowing her to influence the talk to a greater extent than might be expected. Moreover, both the parent and teacher revealed during their interviews that they were ex-colleagues who had known each other for many years. They might thus be regarded as friends of similar social status who had already established a trusting relationship.

Counter evidence

As I have noted, I did find two cases in which the parents and teachers appeared to act as equal partners so as to bring about mutually beneficial educational outcomes. However, my study has also generated much evidence to challenge the notion of equal partnership between parents and teachers. The participants in my study, for example, did not usually engage in meaningful, two-way information exchange (section 4.1), share responsibility for students' learning (section 4.2) or have equal conversational rights (section 4.5). Moreover, much of the talk I observed appeared directed towards the avoidance of harm, in keeping with Pillet-Shore (2015 and 2016), suggesting that the parents and teachers in my study did not count on receiving one

another's unqualified support. It might be argued that the parents and teachers who featured in section 4.2 were acting as partners since they were collaborating with one another in order to improve student learning. These sequences, however, were invariably initiated and carried through by teachers, with parents typically providing encouragement or acting as by-standers. Such behaviour could not, therefore, be described as a partnership in which both parties take joint responsibility for achieving their aims – see section 2.2.3. My findings thus support those researchers who have noted the asymmetrical nature of parent-teacher relationships (MacLure and Walker, 2000; Weininger and Lareau, 2003) or have observed that partnerships between parents and teachers tend not to occur in practice (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011; Lemmer, 2012).

It could also be claimed that the parents and teachers in my study acted as partners in order to achieve their interpersonal – as opposed to instrumental – aims, either by jointly positioning the teacher as the expert (section 4.5) or by working together to establish friendly relationships (section 4.6). The anecdote recounted by the teacher and student in excerpt 4.6.e, for example, may have strengthened the bonds between the participants but did not appear to further the student's learning. Similarly, the exchange of compliments between the parent and teacher in excerpt 4.6.f was not related to educational outcomes. Whilst such behaviour seems consistent with the notion of 'mutually respectful relationships' (Weiss et al., 2009, p. 4), the parents and teachers in these cases did not appear to be directly concerned with students' learning. Moreover, in some cases mutual support between parents and teachers might

have been detrimental to the learning needs of the student. In excerpt 4.6.h, for instance, the fact that the parent sided with the teacher in opposition to her daughter appears to have antagonised the student and risked confrontation. The parents and teachers in my study might thus be regarded as partners in the sense that they worked to support one another in order to meet their interpersonal needs. They could not, however, be regarded as partners in the sense used by the researchers in section 2.2.3 since these exchanges were not directly related to the educational needs of students.

5.2.2 Consumer and Service-provider

Expected behaviour

As I noted in section 2.2.2, several researchers have drawn attention to a model for parent-teacher interaction based on free-market principles (McNamara et al, 2000; Addi-Raccah and Arviv-Elyashiv, 2008; Inglis, 2012). According to this model, the education of students can be regarded as a service provided by schools for parents who act as consumers. Compared to the 'partnership' model in which both parties are assumed to have equal status, this would place parents in the more influential position. Indeed, Inglis (2012, p.86) has described 'an arc of power' across the various models for parent-teacher interaction, with parents having greatest influence within the 'consumer' model. This shift in the balance of power could affect the way in which parents behave in two ways. Firstly, parents would be more likely to adopt a proactive role and engage directly with teachers in supporting learning

(McNamara et al., 2000; Inglis, 2012). Secondly, they would be more willing to advocate on behalf of their children or challenge school policy and practice in order to obtain more favourable treatment (Weininger and Lareau, 2003; Auerbach, 2007; Inglis, 2012). The introduction of market-based policies may also influence the ways in which schools and teachers behave towards parents. McNamara et al. (2000, p.475), for example, have pointed out that increased parental choice would oblige schools to 'promote a positive image of themselves' in order to maintain their position within a competitive market place, whilst Inglis (2012, p.87) has drawn attention to an increased emphasis on 'public relations' within the teaching profession. I will now discuss the evidence which has emerged from my study which supports or undermines this model for parent-teacher interaction.

Evidence from parents

As I noted above, the 'consumer' model suggests that parents would be more likely to question the quality of the education that their children receive or request that teachers modify the 'service' they provide. Of the fifty-two conversations I recorded, however, I observed such behaviour in only two cases, and in one of these the parent made her request indirectly. This can be explained in terms of politeness theory (Brown and Levinson, 1987) – see section 2.4. According to Brown and Levinson, making a request places an imposition on the recipient, thus restricting their freedom to act unimpeded. A parent making a request or advocating on behalf of their child might therefore employ politeness strategies to mitigate any potential loss of 'face' for the

teacher. Brown and Levinson suggested that the simplest strategy would be not to perform the act – as in almost all of the conversations I recorded. However, they also suggested that the strategy a person chooses will depend on the disparity in social status between the parties involved, with smaller differences resulting in a reduced need for politeness. Parents who saw themselves as similar in status to teachers would thus be more likely to impose on them by making requests. Support for this idea comes from those researchers who have found that well-educated, middle-class parents were more likely to request special treatment for their children than their working-class counterparts (Auerbach, 2007; Weininger and Lareau, 2003). Given that the school in which my research took place serves a relatively affluent catchment area (section 3.3) – where many the parents would have had similar social status to their children’s teachers – such behaviour might thus have been expected. The parents in my study, however, tended not to advocate on behalf of their children, regardless of their social background. I will now suggest possible reasons why this was not the case.

The absence of advocacy in the conversations I analysed could be explained in terms of the circumstances of the school where my research took place. At the time of my study, the school in question was academically successful, with most students making excellent progress (section 3.3). It might thus be argued that the parents involved would have had less cause for complaint than those at a school performing less well or may have wished to avoid intervening in a system that appeared to be running smoothly. Some support for this view can be found from the research literature I reviewed in section 2.2.4 (Montgomery,

2005; Katyal and Evers, 2007; Dobbins and Abbot, 2010). Katyal and Evers (2007, pp.64-65), for example, have described how the parents in their study, whilst expressing high educational aspirations for their children, believed that 'education was the responsibility of the professional educators and teachers were best equipped to teach their children'. This way of viewing parent-teacher relationships would make parental advocacy less likely. Alternatively, the absence of such behaviour might be expected if the participants in my study placed a greater value on maintaining 'face' than on achieving their instrumental aims. This argument is supported by Lim (1994), who has suggested that certain politeness strategies are more likely in societies which place greater value on the interests of groups rather than individuals. Viewed from this perspective, the cultural values of the parents in my study may have predisposed them towards avoiding confrontation, regardless of their social status. Again, this would have made the parents in my study less likely to advocate on behalf of their children.

Evidence from teachers

According to the 'consumer' model, schools are required to compete with one another within an open market, meaning that the choices made by parents will determine their long-term success. Given this scenario, parent-teacher meetings could be viewed as opportunities for teachers to promote the positive aspects of their school (McNamara et al., 2000). They might thus be expected to avoid confrontation and work to establish positive customer relations (Inglis, 2012). With regard to my study, I found much evidence to

suggest that teachers were keen to minimise harm (section 4.3), strengthen their relationships with parents (section 4.6), and avoid conflict (section 4.7). These findings support the notion of teachers as service providers working to meet the needs of parents and are also in agreement with some of the researchers whose work I reviewed in section 2.3 (Pillet-Shore, 2004; Tveit, 2009; Markstrom, 2011). However, I found no evidence to suggest that the teachers in my study were engaging 'marketing' activities – though it is possible that the promotion of the school may have been taking place on other levels or through different channels. Moreover, in two of the cases involving parental complaints (section 4.7), the teachers avoided confrontation by agreeing with the parents' criticism of school policy. This suggests that the teachers in my study were working to meet their own needs rather than those of the school and seems analogous to the way in which parents sided with teachers rather than their children (section 5.1.2). It is also consistent with Pillet-Shore (2004, p.16), who has described how parents and teachers created opportunities to 'affiliate' by jointly complaining about the school. I would add, however, that the parents and teachers in my study were willing to defend their professional status – and so risk conflict – when they felt that this was under threat (excerpt 4.4.b). Such behaviour seems in keeping with Addi-Racah and Arviv-Elyashi (2008) who have described how teachers resisted when parents 'encroached on their professional domain'.

5.2.3 Natural Enemies

A well-established view

In section 5.1.2, I pointed to the prevalence of cautious talk in the parent-teacher conversations I recorded and described the various ways in which parents and teachers worked to avoid harm. The researchers whose work I reviewed in section 2.3.3 (MacLure and Walker, 2000; Weininger and Lareau, 2003) appear to have interpreted such behaviour in terms of opposition or hostility between parents and teachers. MacLure and Walker (2000), for example, have accounted for such wariness by considering parents and teachers as opponents, critically scrutinising one another and seeking to protect themselves from blame. Further support for this view comes from the studies I reviewed in section 2.3.1 (Walker, 1998; Lemmer, 2012; Matthiesen, 2015). For instance, Lemmer (2012, p.91) has reported 'great trepidation' and 'fear of causing repercussions' on the part of parents. Such thinking can also be found within the parental involvement literature, with researchers pointing to the inherent conflict within parent-teacher relationships (Lareau, 1987; McNamara et al, 2000, Attanucci, 2004), or mistrust and fear on the part of both parents and teachers (Ferguson, 2008; Dobbins and Abbott, 2010; Ferrara, 2010). Moreover, a number of these researchers have used military terminology or metaphors when describing parent-teacher meetings (MacLure and Walker, 2000; Tveit, 2009; Baeck, 2010). MacLure and Walker (2000, pp.21-22), for example, have described meetings as 'skirmishes' in which the participants critically scrutinise one another from 'entrenched positions'. It

would thus appear that the notion of parents and teachers working in opposition to one another is widespread within the field of parental involvement. Indeed, Pillet-Shore (2016, p.34) has noted that the literature relating to parent-teacher meetings ‘overwhelmingly portrays these encounters as filled with enmity’ and that ‘reports of parent-teacher conflict are pervasive and widely accepted’. I will now consider the evidence that has emerged from my study which supports this way of viewing parent-teacher relationships.

Examples of conflict

As I noted in section 4.7, conflict scenarios did occur during my study, though these were not common. Indeed, of the fifty-two conversations available for inspection, I found only three in which the parent could be said to have been in opposition to the teacher or the school over matters relating to education. The teachers involved in two of these meetings, however, either changed the subject or agreed with the parent that the school had been at fault, thus avoiding confrontation. By contrast, the teacher involved in the third case ‘stood her ground’ following the complaint from the parent – who was also a teacher – leading to a heated exchange of views (excerpts 4.7.a-b). This meeting thus provided the only evidence of unresolved disagreement between parents and teachers in my study. Even here, however, the participants appeared to be working to resolve their differences rather than engage in conflict. Indeed, this conversation ended with a lengthy ‘reconciliation’ sequence in which both parties appeared to be working to repair any damage

caused. Such behaviour seems in keeping with the findings of Ranson, Martin and Vincent (2004) – see section 2.2.4 – who have noted that, whilst ‘storming’ parents might initially use strong language to express their anger, they would later engage in a more civil dialogue with teachers in order to better understand and resolve the cause of the problem. Indeed, the parent stated during her interview that she had chosen to end the meeting ‘politely’ – see section 4.7 – despite feeling dissatisfied with the way in which the teacher had acted. This suggests that her wish to avoid further conflict and restore friendly relations had outweighed any perceived benefits in the pursuit of her complaint.

The parent involved in the disagreement above also appeared to be in opposition to the teacher in her other recorded conversation (excerpt 4.7.d), though the conflict in this case was with regard to who should be in control of the meeting rather than the education of the student. At the start of this conversation, the teacher had been firmly in control, addressing herself to the student and putting a series of searching questions to him with regard to his poor attainment. The parent, however, twice interrupted the teacher to put questions of her own to the student. On both occasions, the teacher immediately repeated the parent’s question in her own words, thus re-establishing her control of the conversation. Moreover, the parent and the teacher spoke over one another for an extended time in order to complete their turns at two other points in the meeting. It would thus appear that, whilst the parent and the teacher were working together towards the same instrumental aim – getting the student to improve his attainment – they were in

opposition with regard to who should be in control of the conversation. Such behaviour seems in agreement with other studies based on the direct observation of parent-teacher meetings (Lemmer, 2012; Pillet-Shore, 2012; Matthiesen, 2015) – see section 2.3. Both Lemmer (2012) and Matthiesen (2015), for example, have reported that the way in which teachers controlled conversations prevented parents from raising concerns of their own. I would add, however, that the two cases of conflict I have considered in this section involved the same parent – who was herself a teacher and had been involved in confrontation with school staff on several previous occasions. It could thus be argued that these cases were atypical and do not provide strong evidence to support the notion of parents and teachers as adversaries.

The case against conflict

As I have previously noted, the tendency for the parents and teachers in my study to support rather than confront one another stands in contrast to the published research I outlined at the start of this section. This apparent reluctance to engage in conflict could be interpreted as a wish to avoid threats to the 'face' of the individuals concerned (Brown and Levinson, 1987). Such behaviour would be in keeping with the absence of advocacy by parents I discussed in section 5.2.2 and might be explained in similar terms. Moreover, the presence of students in most of the conversations I recorded might have made conflict less likely. Support for this idea comes from Tveit (2007) who observed that student participation had an impact on both the form and content of parent-teacher conversations, making both parents and teachers

less likely to raise problem issues. Along similar lines, it is possible that the close proximity of other parents and teachers in the same school hall may have made the participants less likely to openly disagree with one another. A further possibility is that conflict was more common at the school in which my research took place, but that this was not detected using the data collection methods I employed. This could have been due to the way in which I sampled conversations or because of changes in participants' behaviour due to the presence of a recording device – see section 7.1. Alternatively, the theoretical frameworks used by other researchers (e.g. MacLure and Walker, 2000) or the general tendency for individuals – including researchers – to focus on negative rather than neutral or positive events (Baumeister et al., 2001) may have resulted in greater emphasis being placed on conflict.

The way in which parents responded when students disagreed with teachers or resisted attempts to influence their behaviour also provides evidence to suggest that the relationship between the adult participants in my study was not antagonistic. In excerpt 4.5.b, for example, the student appears to have been resisting the teacher's line of questioning by delaying her answers and keeping her responses very brief. The parent, however, did not support her child and instead positioned herself with the teacher by posing challenging questions of her own. Similarly, the parent sided with the teacher rather than her child during the conversation from which excerpts 4.6.g and 4.6.h were taken. During her interview, the student said that she had felt annoyed because her mother had known that she had been working hard at home. This is significant since it suggests that the parent was willing to position herself

with the teacher even though the criticism levelled against her daughter may not have been justified. Evidence to suggest that teachers supported parents comes from excerpt 4.6.i, which was taken from a conversation during which the student had been subjected to sustained criticism from the teacher.

Towards the end of this meeting, the parent also placed pressure on the student, causing him to openly express his irritation. This prompted the teacher to make it clear that she agreed with the parent. It would thus seem that, where disagreement or conflict occurred in my study, this was more likely to take place between the adult participants and the student rather than between parents and teachers. Indeed, I recorded only two cases in which the parent did not side with the teacher, and in one of these the parent acted in the role of mediator. This suggests that the parents and teachers in my study were able to set aside any differences that may have existed between them in order to achieve their instrumental aims.

5.2.4 Layperson and Expert

Previous research

As I noted in section 2.2.2, Hornby (2011) has described an 'expert' model for parent-teacher interaction in which teachers act as knowledgeable specialists and provide information or advice, whilst parents support them and do not contest matters related to learning. According to this model, parents play a less important role than teachers since they do not have the knowledge or skills needed to successfully manage the education of their children. Several

researchers within the field of parental involvement – see section 2.2.2 – have provided evidence to support this model (Katyal and Evers, 2007; Zaoura and Aubrey, 2010; Kavanagh, 2013). For example, Katyal and Evers (2007) have suggested that parents and teachers ‘have unmistakably demarcated roles as far as student learning is concerned’ (p.72), with the former taking little part in day-to-day educational activities. Similarly, Zaoura and Aubrey (2010), have reported that teachers saw the role of parents as passive and limited to checking homework and taking an interest in their children’s attainments. Evidence to support this perspective also comes from the majority of the studies I reviewed in section 2.3 (MacLure and Walker, 2000; Symeou, 2003; Cheatham and Ostrosky, 2011; Inglis, 2012; Matthiesen, 2015). For instance, Symeou (2003, p.21) has noted the subsidiary role played by parents and observed how they contributed information only when prompted to do so by the teacher. The ‘expert’ model thus seems to have been widely recognised within the field of parental involvement and is supported by studies across a range of educational contexts.

Evidence from my study

My study has identified three patterns of talk which support the ‘expert’ model of parent-teacher interaction outlined in section 2.2.2. Firstly, the large majority of the conversations I recorded involved the uninterrupted flow of information from teachers to parents (excerpt 4.1.a). Moreover, when parents did seek to contribute, this tended to be later in meetings, suggesting that they may have considered the knowledge that they possessed to be less important.

This pattern of talk is in agreement with those researchers who have generated quantitative evidence to show that teachers do most of the talking during parent-teacher meetings (Symeou, 2003; Cheatham and Ostrosky, 2011). Secondly, the teachers in my study worked to establish their specialist knowledge and to defend their professional status where necessary. In excerpt 4.4.c, for example, the parent recommended a learning resource to her child, thus revealing her familiarity with the teacher's subject area. This prompted the teacher to make it clear that she was already well aware of the resource in question, raising the possibility that she had felt threatened by the parent's expertise. Such behaviour is in keeping with MacLure and Walker (2000, p.19), who have pointed out that, to avoid challenging the teacher's authority, parents tended not to reveal their own subject-related knowledge until later in the conversation, whilst those who were themselves teachers tended not to disclose the fact. Further evidence to support the 'expert' model comes from the way in which teachers controlled conversations. As I have previously noted, the teachers in my study almost always set the agenda (excerpt 4.5.a), decided who would speak (excerpt 4.5.b) and focused on the knowledge that they possessed (excerpt 4.5.c). Moreover, one teacher defended her right to be the person asking questions when this appeared to be threatened by the parent (excerpt 4.7.d). This is in agreement with Inglis (2012, p.88), who found that the teachers in her study established their authority by 'setting the agenda and deciding the valid issues' during meetings.

Explaining 'expert' behaviour

As I pointed out in section 5.1.2, both the tendency for teachers to present themselves as competent professionals (excerpt 4.4.a) and their control of parent-teacher meetings (excerpts 4.5.a-4.5.c) can be explained in terms of politeness theory (Brown and Levinson, 1987). Seen from this perspective, the 'expert' behaviour of the teachers in my study could be regarded as a means to deter challenges or avoid sensitive topics, both of which would risk loss of 'face'. This would be in agreement with Markstrom (2011) – see section 2.3 – who noted that the teacher in her study controlled the conversation in order to avoid having to label students herself. There is, however, an alternative way in which the concept of 'face' could be used to explain 'expert' behaviour. It is possible that the teachers in my study may have felt obliged to act in this way in order to meet the expectations of parents. If these teachers believed that they were expected to be the 'expert' then to avoid performing this role, or to do so badly, would mean loss of 'face'. This would explain the awkward manner in which the teacher involved in excerpt 4.6.a delivered his apology and would complement the work of Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2005) – see section 2.2.2 – who considered the involvement of parents in terms of perceived roles. Politeness theory can also be used to explain the reluctance of the parents in my study to demonstrate their own specialist knowledge. According to MacLure and Walker (2000), parental demonstrations of expertise diminish the power of teachers and challenge their authority. Such behaviour would thus constitute a threat to the teacher's 'face' and so might be avoided by parents. Alternatively, the parents in my study might have felt

that it was not their place to take the initiative in matters related to learning, causing them to adopt a separate and more passive role (Katyal and Evers, 2007). Support for this explanation comes from those studies based on the direct observation of parent-teacher meetings (Inglis, 2012; Lemmer, 2012) which I reviewed in section 2.3. Lemmer (2012, p.94), for example, has noted that 'parents have been socialised into the rituals of parent-teacher conferences by school protocol, their own experience when learners and historical knowledge about parent-teacher conferences'. Again, this would be in agreement with the model proposed by Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2005).

Counter evidence

According to Cheatham and Ostrosky (2011, p.24), the expert status of teachers is 'expected and acknowledged' during parent-teacher meetings, leading parents and teachers to construct themselves as advice-seekers and advice-givers respectively. Given the evidence generated by my research to support the 'expert' model for parent-teacher interaction, similar behaviour might have been expected in the conversations I observed. However, I found only two cases in which the teacher offered advice to parents (section 4.1), with both of these occurring late in the conversation after the 'official business' (Pillet-Shore, 2012, p.192) of the meeting had been completed. Moreover, the teachers in my study often spoke directly to the student (e.g. excerpt 4.3.f), thus avoiding the need to give parents advice. This apparent reluctance on the part of teachers can again be explained in terms of politeness theory (Brown and Levinson, 1987). Advice-giving threatens the positive 'face' of parents by

suggesting a lack of competence, and also their negative ‘face’ by obliging them to follow some recommended course of action (Pillet-Shore, 2015). Teachers might thus choose not to give advice to parents or engage in politeness strategies to minimise loss of ‘face’. This second strategy appears to have been adopted by the teachers in Cheatham and Ostrosky’s (2011) study since they tended to give advice indirectly rather than directly. Most of the teachers I observed, however, did not give advice to parents, indirectly or otherwise, suggesting that they were more sensitive to the potential for their talk to cause harm than their counterparts in Cheatham and Ostrosky’s study. I would therefore suggest that, whilst the parents and teachers involved in my research acted in accordance with Hornby’s (2011) ‘expert’ model, the need for politeness may have modified their behaviour – as illustrated in figure 4.

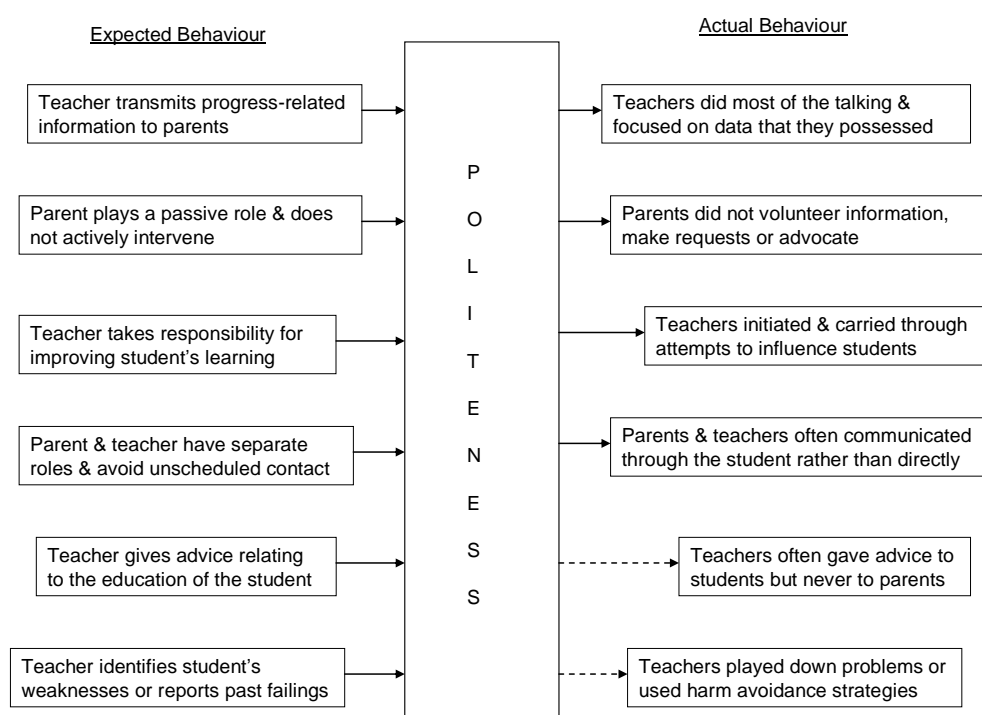


Figure 4: The influence of politeness

Seen in this way, politeness appears to be suppressing or filtering out those behaviours associated with the 'expert' model that threaten the 'face' of the participants. The need for politeness might therefore be viewed in the same light as the 'barriers' used by some researchers to account for the absence of partnership. This has implications for school policy which I will consider in section 6.3.

There are several reasons why politeness strategies may have been a particularly important consideration for the teachers in my study. Firstly, as I have previously noted, the potential for loss of 'face' will be greater if there is an 'audience' present (Goffman, 1967, p.24). Since students attended almost all of the conversations I recorded, this would have increased the potential for harm and may have made the teachers in my study more cautious. Such an explanation would be in agreement with Tveit (2007) – see section 2.3.5 – who has reported that student participation had an impact on both the form and content of parent-teacher meetings. Secondly, the atypical circumstances of the school in which my research took place could also have made advice-giving behaviour less likely. As I mentioned in section 5.1.1, my study took place at a time when the number of school-aged children in the catchment area was falling, thus placing pressure on the school to attract more students. This may have made the teachers in my study particularly reluctant to threaten the 'face' of parents. Alternatively, the proportion of professionally educated parents at the school in which my research took place (section 3.3) might also have influenced advice-giving behaviour. As I pointed out in section 2.4, Brown and Levinson (1987) have suggested that the likelihood of a face-

threatening act being performed is dependent on the difference in social status between the individuals involved. Evidence to support this idea comes from Weininger and Lareau (2003, p.396), who found that teachers were more likely to 'lecture' working-class parents than their middle-class counterparts. It could thus be argued that advice-giving at the school in which my research took place would have been less likely since a higher proportion of the parents were of a similar or higher social status than their children's teachers.

Summary

I have divided this chapter into two major sections, these being concerned with the aims of participants during parent-teacher conversations – relating to my first two research questions – and the relationships between them – relating to my third research question.

Conversational aims

I have defined the instrumental aims of parents and teachers as those which relate directly to student learning. In my study, these took the form of the communication of attainment-related information and attempts to influence the behaviour of students. The interpersonal aims of parents and teachers are concerned with their needs as individuals and do not necessarily result in improved student outcomes. Four such aims emerged from my study, these being harm avoidance, managing identity, conversational control and mutual support.

The communication of information was almost always initiated by teachers, with the flow being predominantly one-way. Such sequences were a central component of most meetings and were accepted without question by parents. Some parents, however, stated that they had felt well-informed about their children's progress before the meeting took place, thus calling into question the usefulness of such talk.

Attempts by parents and teachers to influence students included challenges to their attitude or conduct, persuasive talk aimed at getting them to work harder, advice to improve attainment, and reassurance or confidence boosting. These sequences were observed in almost all of the meetings in which the student was present and were invariably led by teachers. Such behaviour does not appear to have been previously reported in the research literature.

Talk which appeared designed to avoid harm occurred throughout the conversations I recorded. Teachers delivered their talk particularly carefully, possibly in order to avoid being blamed for student failure. Parents seemed reluctant to challenge teachers or raise topics that might be considered as threatening. However, the adult participants seemed less concerned to protect the feelings of students. They also rejected the idea that they were acting to protect themselves from harm.

In many conversations, parents and teachers worked to present themselves as competent in their respective roles. In terms of politeness theory, such behaviour could be seen as a means for parents and teachers to boost their

'face' and so satisfy their interpersonal needs. Alternatively, it could be argued that the parents and teachers in my study constructed 'strong' identities for themselves to avoid being blamed for student shortcomings.

In all but two conversations, the teachers in my study set the agenda and assumed the right to ask questions. Most parents did not contest this and in some cases encouraged the teacher to take control. Such behaviour may have occurred due to the limited time allocated to parent-teacher meetings. Alternatively, teachers may have been attempting to steer the talk away from sensitive issues and towards topics where their authority was unlikely to be challenged.

The parents and teachers in my study readily accepted responsibility for their shortcomings and worked to support one another and build positive relationships. Such 'friendly' behaviour has not been widely reported within the parental involvement literature, possibly due to the theoretical frameworks used by other researchers. This tendency towards mutual support could be viewed as an end in its own right or as a strategic investment of 'goodwill' to be drawn on at some future time.

Parent-teacher relationships

The parents and teachers whose conversations I recorded did not share responsibility, engage in meaningful dialogue or enjoy the same conversational rights. Moreover, the prevalence of harm avoidance strategies

suggests that they had yet to establish trusting relationships. The adult participants in my study also directed much of the talk towards students, limiting the opportunities for parent-teacher interaction. They could thus not be considered as equal partners. This view is in agreement with those researchers who have questioned the notion of partnership between schools and families.

In the 'consumer' model for parent-teacher interaction, the balance of power is shifted towards parents, making them more likely to advocate on behalf of their children. However, I observed little evidence to support this idea. The absence of such behaviour suggests that the parents in my study wished to avoid threatening the 'face' of teachers, or were reluctant to intervene in a system that was already working well. The 'consumer' model would also encourage schools to engage in competitive marketing strategies in order to attract students. However, I found no examples of such behaviour in my study.

The parents and teachers in my study were typically not critical or hostile towards one another. Indeed, much of the talk I observed appeared to be concerned with avoiding confrontation, with both parties appearing reluctant to raise topics that might be considered threatening. In the one case where confrontation did occur, the parent and teacher appeared to have resolved their differences and ended the meeting politely. Moreover, when students expressed disagreement or resisted the advice they were being given, their parents typically supported the teacher. Divisions thus tended to occur between generations, rather than between home and school.

The parents in my study tended to adopt the role of 'layperson', whilst teachers almost always acted as the 'expert' with authority on educational matters. This occurred despite parents' detailed knowledge of their children and could be observed even when parents were teachers themselves. Such behaviour can be explained in terms of politeness theory. Parents may have been reluctant to threaten the teacher's authority by revealing their own expertise, whilst teachers may have been attempting to maintain 'face' by fulfilling perceived expectations.

Chapter 6 – Conclusions and Recommendations

At the start of my thesis (section 1.1), I explained that the aims of my study were to explore the nature of parent-teacher meetings at my school, and to generate findings that would prove useful to others or stimulate further research. In this chapter, I will ‘step back’ and consider my findings in terms of these general aims. The first part of this chapter draws together the findings which have emerged from my investigation and makes conclusions with regard to my research questions, which I have again reproduced below:

- What are the parents and teachers at my school trying to achieve when they engage in conversation during parent-teacher meetings?
- How do the parents and teachers at my school go about achieving their conversational aims?
- What can the talk observed between the parents and teachers at my school tell me about the nature of their relationships?

For the reasons I outlined at the start of my discussion, I will consider the first two of these questions together, before going on to consider my third research question. This chapter will thus be organised into two sections, the first relating to the aims of participants and the second to parent-teacher relationships. In the second part, I will draw attention to the significance of my research by highlighting the theoretical and practical implications of my findings. I will also make recommendations for researchers with an interest in

parental involvement, as well as for school leaders and policy-makers with an interest in parent-teacher meetings.

6.1 Concluding My Research

The aims of participants

The parents and teachers in my study appear to have had a range of conversational aims. These can be classified as instrumental aims (section 5.1.1) – concerned with improving educational outcomes for students – or interpersonal aims (section 5.1.2) – relating to the individual needs of parents and teachers. The instrumental aims of the adult participants involved the transmission of information relating to the academic progress of students, and attempts to influence students' behaviour or learning. With regard to the first of these, communication between the parents and teachers in my study was largely one-way. Teachers tended to transmit attainment-related information to parents, who typically acted as passive recipients. Such sequences were a central component of most meetings, even where parents said that they had been well-informed beforehand. Similarly, attempts to influence students were initiated and led by teachers, with parents playing a supporting role. Such behaviour almost always occurred when the student was present. This does not appear to have been reported in the research literature, possibly since parent-teacher meetings in other contexts have not often involved students.

The interpersonal aims of the parents and teachers in my study comprised of avoiding harm, establishing and maintaining 'strong' identities, controlling conversations, and building mutually supportive relationships. Teachers seemed particularly sensitive to the potential for loss of 'face' and employed a range of strategies which appeared designed to avoid harm. However, both parties were willing to challenge students where their effort or behaviour was considered unacceptable. The propensity for the parents and teachers in my study to present positive identities to one another could be viewed in terms of a basic need to feel approved of by others – see section 2.4. However, this behaviour might also have served to deter challenges or deflect blame and so could also be regarded in terms of harm-avoidance. Similarly, the control of conversations by teachers enabled them to focus on topics about which they could speak with authority and so could be considered as a means to avoid harm. However, such behaviour might have been prompted by the short duration of parent-teacher meetings. The tendency for parents and teachers to build friendly relationships and provide mutual support – which has not been widely reported in the literature – could also be viewed in terms of their interpersonal needs, though this might also be interpreted as strategic action by parents and teachers in order to bring about their longer-term instrumental aims.

Parent-teacher relationships

The parents and teachers who participated in my research did not jointly discuss their aims, share responsibility for improving student outcomes, or

engage in meaningful, two-way dialogue (section 5.2.1). Moreover, the prevalence of harm avoidance strategies and identity work suggests that they had yet to establish trusting relationships. It would therefore seem inappropriate to describe the adult participants in my study as partners in the sense used by many researchers within the field of parental involvement (section 2.2.3). I also found little evidence to support the notion of parental advocacy or attempts by teachers to 'market' their school (section 5.2.2). This may have been because the parents and teachers in my study felt a particular need to avoid imposing on one another, or they may have felt that such behaviour was unnecessary given that the school was considered to be performing well. I would thus suggest that the adult participants in my study could not be accurately described as consumers and service providers. With regard to the notion of parents and teachers as opponents, there were few instances of actual conflict between the adult participants involved in my investigation (section 5.2.3). Moreover, they showed a propensity to support one another and build positive relationships, with parents typically backing teachers when disputes with students occurred and teachers agreeing with parents when they complained about school policy. The evidence generated by my research thus calls into question the widely held notion of intrinsic opposition or hostility between parents and teachers (section 2.2.5).

Taking into account the various ways in which parent-teacher relationships have been described, the 'expert' model most accurately matches the behaviour of the parents and teachers in my investigation (section 5.2.4). In almost all of the conversations I recorded, the teachers involved positioned

themselves as providers of attainment-related data, whilst parents acted as passive recipients of information. The teachers in my study also constructed themselves as knowledgeable specialists and defended this position when it appeared to be threatened. For their part, parents allowed the teacher to decide what topics would be discussed and in what order. They also allowed, and in some cases encouraged, teachers to control conversations and do most of the talking. Additionally, the parents in my study tended to adopt a supporting role and did not take the initiative during attempts to influence students. My findings thus provide support for those researchers who have considered parent-teacher relationships in terms of 'expert' and 'layperson' roles. Perhaps significantly, however, the teachers in my study did not give advice to parents or set them goals, as might be expected within the 'expert' model. This stands in contrast to their behaviour towards students, and also to the findings reported by other researchers (Cheatham and Ostrosky, 2011). The absence of such behaviour is consistent with the prevalence of harm-avoidance strategies – including identity work and attempts by participants to build positive relationships (section 5.1.2) – and suggests that the desire to avoid imposing on parents by giving advice was a particularly important consideration for the teachers in my study.

6.2 Recommendations For Researchers

Parent-teacher meetings and Epstein's typology

My findings have important implications for the way in which researchers use Epstein's typology (section 2.1) to categorise conversations between parents and teachers. Epstein (2010) used regular parent-teacher meetings involving the reciprocal exchange of information as an example of type 2 involvement, that is to say communication between home and school. This is supported to some extent by the evidence generated during my investigation – most of the conversations I examined did indeed contain sequences in which teachers passed on information regarding students' educational progress to parents (section 4.1). However, many of the meetings I recorded also involved the adult participants placing pressure on students to improve educational outcomes (see section 4.2). This behaviour suggests that the parent-teacher meetings in my study were also being used as opportunities for the adult participants to intervene directly in students' learning (section 5.1.1). These sequences of talk might thus be more accurately described as type 3 involvement, described by Epstein as volunteering in the form of in-school assistance. The conversations I examined in my study cannot, therefore, be considered in terms of a single type of parental involvement, making it difficult to incorporate them into any one category within Epstein's framework. This is significant since Epstein's typology has been widely adopted as a theoretical starting point for researchers within the wider field of parental involvement (section 2.1). When investigating parental involvement during parent-teacher

meetings, I would thus recommend that researchers consider individual sequences of talk – which can be assigned to individual categories within Epstein's framework – rather than whole conversations as their basic unit of analysis.

Politeness theory: a useful starting point

As I have already noted (sections 5.2.1-5.2.3), my findings provide only limited support for those theoretical frameworks based on the notions of partnership (Epstein, 2010; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005), opposition (MacLure and Walker, 2000; Weininger and Lareau, 2003) or market forces (McNamara et al, 2000; Inglis, 2012). The evidence which has emerged from my research does, however, support the notion of the teacher as 'expert' (Hornby (2011), though this seems at odds with the absence of advice-giving behaviour (section 5.2.4). I would thus argue that my findings are significant since they highlight the need for an alternative theoretical model for parent-teacher relationships. Such thinking is in accordance with Jaynes (2011), who has already drawn attention to the limitations of existing theories and called for a new framework based on a wider definition of parental involvement. In the previous chapter, I suggested that politeness theory (Brown and Levinson, 1987) can be used to account for the various harm avoidance strategies used by the parents and teachers in my investigation. The tendency for the adult participants in my study to present themselves as competent in their roles and the control of conversations by teachers could also be regarded as defensive measures which served to avoid loss of 'face'. Moreover, the friendliness and

mutual support I observed could be viewed as an investment of 'face' by parents and teachers in order to avoid or mitigate future harm. It would thus appear that politeness theory provides a theoretical framework which can usefully account for the findings which have emerged from my study – some of which have not been previously interpreted in this way. However, it is not clear why those parents in my investigation with professional backgrounds exhibited behaviour similar to that of the working-class parents in Weininger and Lareau's (2003) study, or why the teachers I observed seemed particularly keen to avoid harm. I would therefore recommend further development of this theory in order to fully explain the interactions which take place during parent-teacher meetings.

The influence of students on conversations

The findings generated by my study have potentially significant implications for the way in which the students who participate in parent-teacher meetings might be viewed. In section 4.2, I presented evidence to show how one student prompted the teacher to deliver extended 'reassurance' sequence (excerpt 4.2.f), whilst in section 4.6 I showed how a student actively resisted the pressure placed on her to work harder (excerpt 4.2.g). These examples suggest that the actions of students during meetings can have a considerable influence on the nature of meetings. Moreover, even where students do not actively contribute to the conversation, it could be argued that their presence alone would alter the nature of the talk which takes place (section 5.1.1). These findings are important since they stand in contrast to those researchers

who have suggested that students play a non-participatory role during parent-teacher meetings (Walker, 1998; MacLure and Walker, 2000), and also call into question the idea that students' perspectives are overlooked as parents and teachers seek to pursue their own agendas (Inglis, 2012). I would thus argue that the role played by students in parent-teacher meetings may be more significant than has previously been realised and that this should be taken into account by researchers when analysing and interpreting conversations. Such a view would be consistent with Tveit (2009), who has reported that some teachers and parents felt that the presence of students influenced both the form and content of their talk, and Edwards and Alldred (2000), who have described in detail how students create, comply with or resist their parents' involvement.

Some particularly interesting leads

In section 1.3, I explained that my aim was to explore with an open mind the parent-teacher conversations taking place in my workplace, as opposed to testing a particular theory or evaluating changes to educational practice. I did not, therefore, focus on any one group of participants or attempt to isolate particular variables. It is possible, however, that the talk I observed may have been influenced by the demographic characteristics of the participants (McNeal, 2001; Gillies, 2005), their social or cultural backgrounds (Weininger and Lareau, 2003), the nature of the school (Inglis, 2012), or the way in which meetings were organised (Walker, 1998). There are thus many factors that researchers wishing to investigate parent-teacher conversations in the future

could consider. Given the potential significance for students to influence meetings – see above – I would suggest that further research focusing on their concerns and wishes, the roles that they play and how they view the efforts of parents and teachers to influence them would be particularly useful. The fact that two of the three parents in my study who complained were teachers may also be significant since this suggests that knowledge of the education system, rather than social status, could be working to override existing power differences and make challenges more likely – an idea which would call into question the findings of Weininger and Lareau (2003). An investigation focused on the occupational backgrounds of parents might thus be a fruitful avenue for future investigations. Additionally, the divisions that were revealed between parents and their children during the conversations I recorded may be an important area for further investigation. This behaviour stands in contrast to Pillet-Shore (2012), who has suggested that parents and their children might be regarded as a single social entity (section 2.3.5). My findings, however, indicate that this may not be the case for older students, thus raising fundamental questions relating to when and how parents and their children acquire independent identities.

More studies needed in different contexts

My investigation can be considered as case study research (section 3.2), meaning that the findings which have emerged can only be applied to one particular school and even then only over a given period of time. It could be argued, however, that case studies can be usefully transferred to other

contexts (Houghton et al., 2013). Moreover, case study research can be used to identify areas for future investigation (Bassey, 1999) or combined with other case studies to provide a wider picture from which more general conclusions can be drawn (Woodside, 2010). I would therefore propose further research across a wider range of secondary school contexts since this would indicate whether my findings are due to local circumstances or more general in nature. Moreover, the findings generated by my study could be extended by investigating parents' conversations in other contexts in which they are obliged to discuss aspects of their children's lives with institutional representatives. MacLure and Walker (2003) have already called attention to the similarities between parent-teacher meetings and paediatric encounters – see section 2.3.3. Other scenarios could include meetings with social workers, police officers or church leaders. Such comparisons would indicate whether the conversational strategies which have emerged from my study were specific to parent-teacher encounters or were drawn from a more wide-ranging repertoire of skills. Finally, a longitudinal investigation – in which the conversations of one family within a single school are recorded – would indicate how the behaviours of those involved changed over time. Catsambis (2001) – see section 2.2.4 – has already pointed out that the nature and extent of parental involvement changes significantly as students move through the education system. This raises the possibility that the behaviour of parents and teachers might also evolve as they engage with one another in repeated encounters over successive years. This would have significant implications for the way in which teachers and schools approach parent-teacher meetings.

6.3 Recommendations For Schools

One-way communication: a missed opportunity

In the majority of the conversations I recorded, the flow of information was predominantly one-way, with teachers focusing on transmitting the knowledge in their possession (section 5.1.1). Indeed, during their interviews, three of the teachers in my study indicated that the purpose of parent-teacher meetings was to get their 'message' across. Perhaps significantly, however, some parents felt that this information was of limited value since they had already received a written report from the school prior to their meeting. Moreover, it could be argued that meetings would be more productive if the knowledge that parents held was shared with teachers (Barton et al., 2004). These points are important since schools typically allocate only a few minutes for each meeting, with these taking place just once or twice during the academic year (Walker, 1998; Lemmer, 2012; Inglis, 2014). This means that the opportunities available for parents and teachers to engage in face-to-face conversation will be very limited. School leaders might thus consider implementing strategies that would encourage parents and teachers to make more effective use of their limited contact time and so justify the considerable resources invested in parent-teacher meetings. There are two ways in which this might be achieved. First of all, more time could be allocated for meetings. Several of the teachers in my study expressed a need to control conversations in order to get through their agenda in the short time available. They thus did not seek to establish what parents wished to talk about or invite them to make contributions of their

own. Longer meetings would allow for more meaningful dialogue, though this would necessitate a smaller number of appointments during a given parents' evening. A second possibility would be to raise awareness through staff training or communication with parents. Teachers, for example, might be encouraged to begin conversations with open-ended questions, whilst parents could be informed beforehand that teachers may well ask them to contribute information about their children. When I raised these ideas with the staff at the school – see section 3.7 – they responded favourably, with one teacher suggesting that this would make parents' evenings less stressful.

Interpersonal aims versus educational needs

As I have noted in section 5.1.2, much of the talk which emerged from my investigation appeared to be concerned with the interpersonal needs of parents and teachers – avoiding harm, strengthening relationships, or establishing the identities of those concerned – rather than the education of students. These findings are important since they suggest that the adult participants in my study were not using their meetings as productively as they might. Indeed, their apparent need to avoid harm may even have been detrimental to student learning. The parents I observed, for example, did not advocate or make requests on behalf of their children (section 5.2.2), whilst teachers rarely gave advice to parents (section 5.2.4). According to Brown and Levinson (1987) the need to avoid harm is dependent on the social distance between individuals as well as differences in status or power (section 2.4). With regard to parent-teacher meetings, reducing either of these would

make parents and teachers less concerned with maintaining 'face' and allow them to concentrate on improving educational outcomes for students. The social distance between parents and teachers could be reduced by finding ways to bring them into contact more frequently, preferably in less formal situations such as fundraising events or extra-curricular activities. This would be significant since parents and teachers would become more familiar with one another, thus enabling them to build more productive working relationships. Reducing power differences would be harder for schools to bring about due to the inherently asymmetrical nature of parent-teacher relationships (MacLure and Walker, 2000). Some progress could be achieved, however, by changing the way in which parent-teacher meetings are organised (Walker, 1998; Lemmer, 2012; Matthiesen, 2015). Teachers could, for example, move between tables during parents' evenings whilst parents remain seated. Alternatively, parents could be asked to take responsibility for initiating parent-teacher meetings, with these being staged at times and in locations chosen by parents rather than schools.

Parent-teacher meetings and school policy

The majority of the conversations I recorded appear to have been used by parents and teachers as opportunities for directly influencing students (section 4.2). Moreover, such talk emerged spontaneously during meetings and was not discussed by the adult participants beforehand. This has important implications for schools with regard to the way in which they approach parent-teacher meetings. As I noted in section 6.2, joint action by parents and

teachers to influence students could be regarded as type 3 rather than type 2 involvement. According to Epstein et al. (2002), type 2 involvement requires schools to communicate clearly, in a way that can be easily understood by parents, and to obtain feedback from them. By contrast, successful type 3 involvement requires schools to ensure that parents feel welcomed and that their contribution is valued. Schools wishing to move parent-teacher meetings beyond the transmission of attainment-related information would therefore need to modify their approach, perhaps through staff training or by communicating their intentions to parents. Perhaps more importantly, schools would also need to consider the possible negative consequences of using parent-teacher meetings in this way. Lareau (1987), for example, has pointed to increased levels of anxiety when students are placed under pressure to achieve academic success. A number of the parents and teachers in my study also pointed out that such behaviour could antagonise students or place family relationships under strain. It would thus appear that there are potentially significant costs as well as benefits associated with the use of parent-teacher meetings as a vehicle for influencing students. I would therefore suggest that individual schools should decide for themselves whether they would wish to promote such a development and, if so, how best this could be achieved.

Consultations with parents, students and teachers

In section 6.1, I concluded that a modified version of Hornby's (2011) 'expert' model for parent-teacher interaction could best account for the behaviour of the parents and teachers in my study (figure 4). According to this model,

teachers are responsible for the education of students – though the need for politeness means that certain behaviours are suppressed – and parents do not intervene unless requested to do so. Indeed, during their interviews, only four of the parents in my study referred to contact with teachers beyond formal parent-teacher meetings, with one of these being triggered by the school rather than the individuals concerned. This is in agreement with those researchers who have noted that parents do not necessarily consider it appropriate or necessary to become directly involved in their children's education (Montgomery, 2005; Katyal and Evers, 2007; Dobbins and Abbot, 2010). There is also evidence to suggest that teachers would prefer parents to respect their professional status and not become involved in the day-to-day business of teaching (Addi-Raccah and Arviv-Elyashiv, 2008; Zaoura and Aubrey, 2010). This raises the possibility that parents and teachers do not welcome the prospect of face-to-face meetings and poses fundamental questions regarding the purpose of parent-teacher meetings. In section 1.2, I noted the high attendance rates for parent-teacher meetings, both at the school in which my research took place and at other English secondary schools (Peters, 2007). Whilst this could be regarded as an indicator of their popularity, Walker (1998) has pointed out that parents may feel compelled to attend parent-teacher meetings since to do otherwise would risk being judged adversely by their children's teachers. I would therefore suggest that schools should consult with parents, students and teachers to determine their views and then act on the feedback that they receive. Parent-teacher meetings are a long-established and widespread educational practice (section 1.2) and it is possible that their continued existence has become a taken-for-granted by

school leaders and policy-makers. However, my findings have raised the possibility that those directly involved may be against the idea of face-to-face contact – a notion that has not been previously discussed in the literature relating to parent-teacher meetings (section 2.3). If this proved to be the case, then schools might consider the option of not staging meetings, thus freeing up resources that could be used more productively elsewhere.

Chapter 7 – Research Quality and Contribution

In this last chapter, I will reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of my research, and the contribution I have made to existing knowledge. In section 7.1, I will consider the inherent limitations of my investigation. I will also describe the problems I encountered and point out the steps I took – or might have taken – to minimise their impact. In section 7.2, I will point to an aspect of my methodology that might be usefully employed by other researchers. I will also highlight the ways in which my findings have extended what is known with regard to parent-teacher meetings.

7.1 Limitations and Suggested Improvements

Findings not generalisable

The conversations I recorded all took place within a single, somewhat atypical, English secondary school – see section 3.3 – and it seems likely that my data would have been influenced by the particular circumstances of this research setting. In an alternative context and with other participants, very different findings might have been generated. As I noted in section 3.2, this limits the extent to which my findings can be generalised (Gomm, Hammersley and Foster, 2000; Stake, 2005). Moreover, my investigation relates to a particular period of time – see section 3.4 – meaning that my findings may no longer be relevant, even for the school within which my research took place. I would argue, however, that my focus on a single school did enable me to acquire a

more detailed background knowledge of the research setting and the participants than would have been available to me had I divided my time between several research sites. Perhaps more importantly, I would suggest that the patterns of talk I have presented are transferable, meaning that they provide a detailed set of alternative experiences from which readers can take information or ideas and apply them to their own situation (Jensen, 2008; Houghton et al., 2013). For example, I found that the parents and teachers in my study used a variety of strategies to establish or maintain friendly relationships with one another. Whilst it would be inappropriate to conclude that this behaviour applied to parent-teacher conversations generally, it seems reasonable to suggest that such observations might prompt readers to recall or seek out similar patterns of behaviour in their own contexts.

My 'insider' status

I would argue that my position as a teacher at the school in question carried with it a number of benefits and drawbacks. On the one hand, my previous encounters with participants and my knowledge of their personal histories and circumstances would have rendered me more prone to bias and less able to see how conversations could have been constructed differently. My use of conversation analysis (section 3.5), however, helped to reduce bias since this required me to record and transcribe conversations according to a pre-determined analytical procedure. I also adopted reflexive strategies (section 3.6.2) which served to recognise and correct for oversights or distortions, such as writing to other researchers – Eleanor Lemmer (University of South Africa),

Anne Dorthe Tveit (Agder University College, Norway), Noomi Matthiesen (Aarhus University, Denmark), and Lori Thomas (Editor, *School Community Journal*) – and asking them to critically evaluate my findings. A second drawback relates to the way in which my teaching status may have influenced the responses that participants gave during their follow-up interviews. Parents, for instance, may have considered the possible consequences for their children and so responded more cautiously to my interview questions. On the other hand, my position as an ‘insider’ provided several advantages. Some participants, for example, may have been more forthcoming during their interviews when speaking to someone who they already knew and trusted. This seemed to be particularly so with my teaching colleagues, who were surprisingly open when speaking about their conversations with parents. I also had access to data that may not have been easily available to a researcher not familiar with the school. This included confidential information stored on the school records system, as well as my own and my colleagues’ personal knowledge of the participants and the research setting. I would add that my familiarity with the participants and my own teaching experiences enabled me to better empathise with them and more fully appreciate their concerns. The suggestion that teachers may have felt under pressure to take control of conversations (section 5.2.4), for example, was based on my personal feelings during encounters with parents at the school. I would argue that such an interpretation might not have occurred to an externally based researcher with no such experience.

Access to naturally occurring conversations

Whilst the parents I initially contacted to request participation were randomly selected (section 3.4), several stated that they would prefer not to have their conversation recorded. In one case, for example, the parent explained that this was because he and his wife intended to discuss a sensitive topic regarding their child. Similarly, some teachers attempted to steer me towards meetings that they felt would produce 'good' conversations or requested that I did not record encounters with 'difficult' parents. This seemed to be particularly so during the second round of data collection with teachers who had been previously involved. Moreover, a small number of teachers – but not parents – failed to operate the recording device correctly at the start of meetings. Given the simplicity of the controls, the possibility that this was a deliberate strategy used to avoid recording conversations cannot be ruled out. Also, meetings were chosen according to the order in which they appeared on participants' appointment sheets. This resulted in more conversations at earlier times and may have affected which parents were involved, as well as the nature of the talk which took place. For example, a higher proportion of non-working parents might be expected during office hours, whilst later conversations might have been more affected by tiredness or lack of time. Additionally, it is likely that the act of recording conversations – the 'observer's paradox' I pointed out in section 3.4 – will have altered the behaviour of participants. The parent-teacher conversations on which I based my research thus did not necessarily represent all of those which took place at the school in question during my study. With hindsight, I might have reduced sampling

bias by selecting meetings at random from participants' appointment sheets rather than according to the order in which they appeared. It might be argued, however, that a completely representative set of conversations could not be obtained in practice, regardless of the sampling procedures employed. Moreover, my experience as a teacher suggests that the conversations I did record included most of the scenarios that might be expected during conversations with parents.

Too many conversations

In section 3.4, I explained that I would record and transcribe parent-teacher conversations at parents' evening events for all five year groups over a period of two academic years. Transcribing these conversations according to the requirements of conversation analysis, however, took far longer than I had anticipated. A typical 7-8 minute meeting for example, took around 4-5 hours to transcribe, despite using an abbreviated form of transcription notation (see appendix B). A parents' evening in which eight meetings were recorded thus required 32-40 hours of transcription work – excluding the time taken to produce transcripts of follow-up interviews – before I could begin my technical analysis. During the course of my study, I recorded and transcribed conversations at ten such events, a process which occupied several hundred hours of my time. With hindsight, this was an unnecessarily large number of conversations and went beyond the point at which data saturation had been reached. Indeed, as I noted in section 3.5, I was also only able to fully analyse twenty of the transcripts within the planned timescale of my research, meaning

that the majority were used merely as supporting evidence. I would thus readily accept that the time required to record and transcribe these conversations might have been more productively spent working on other areas of my investigation. Moreover, this could be regarded as an ethical failing since I may have caused unnecessary inconvenience for those participants whose conversations I did not subsequently examine. On reflection, my decision to record so many conversations – and to carry on recording conversations – may have been due to my concern, borne of enthusiasm and inexperience, not to miss any important data. Were I to conduct similar research in the future, I would adopt a more flexible approach and continue the data collection phase of my study only up until the point at which no new data appeared to be emerging.

Unstructured interviews

Whilst interviews assisted my interpretation of parent-teacher conversations, it is debatable whether or not all of these should have been unstructured. On the one hand, this format helped put participants at their ease, facilitated rapport building and increased the likelihood that they would speak openly and freely. This was particularly noticeable during one interview when the roles of researcher and participant became reversed. In this interview, the parent began asking me questions, thus revealing her concerns and prompting me to ask questions that would not have occurred to me beforehand. On the other hand, my decision to allow participants greater control over the pace and direction of interviews meant that they often wandered onto seemingly

irrelevant subjects. When this occurred, it was difficult to judge whether or not to interrupt – causing potentially useful data to be missed – or to continue and discard the previous topic. The unstructured nature of the interviews I conducted also made them difficult to analyse systematically. Moreover, their content often varied considerably, thus limiting the extent to which I could compare responses between participants. It could be argued that semi-structured interviews might have elicited a higher proportion of relevant data in a shorter length of time and would also have allowed me to make comparisons within and between cases. However, this would have been at the cost of sensitivity and flexibility, and would have created a more formal and less relaxed interview situation. With hindsight, I feel that the unstructured interviews I conducted worked well during the early part of my study and helped to elicit information that I might otherwise have missed. Having said that, a semi-structured approach – with questions targeted to address emerging issues – may have been a more productive way to interview participants during later rounds of data collection.

7.2 Contribution to Existing Knowledge

A useful methodology

I chose to base my investigation primarily on transcripts of actual conversations (section 3.4.2), my intention being to identify the unconscious or taken-for-granted behaviours of participants (Hutchby and Wooffitt, 2002) and also to show how parent-teacher talk related to the context of meetings

(Bryman, 2012). I also decided to use conversation analysis (section 3.5), my aim being to identify micro-level patterns of talk and reveal how participants went about achieving their conversational aims. As I argued in section 3.5, however, transcript evidence alone cannot shed light on the strategic aims of participants or the wider contexts within which conversations take place. I therefore decided to supplement such evidence with follow-up interviews (section 3.4.3), in keeping with Maynard (2006) who has suggested that conversation analysis can be usefully combined with ethnographic data. With hindsight, the interview responses from the parents and teachers in my study proved unexpectedly useful. Indeed, their comments enabled me to interpret conversations in ways that would not have been possible using transcript evidence alone. In one case, for example, the parent explained that she saw parent-teacher meetings as an opportunity to involve her child – who had specific learning difficulties – in a mainstream educational process, thus ensuring that he felt included in ordinary school life. This parent's motive for attending parents' evenings would not have occurred to me and was not made explicit during her conversation, and so would have remained undetected had I adopted a methodology based on 'pure' conversation analysis (section 3.5). I would thus suggest that, whilst conversational analysis revealed aspects of parent-teacher talk that may not have been detected using alternative approaches, the use of interview evidence in my study enhanced the way in which I was able to interpret conversations. Given the small number of previous studies which have combined conversational analysis with interview evidence (section 2.3), this is a significant contribution to the methodology of

research into parent-teacher meetings and provides a useful template for future investigations.

Up-to-date empirical evidence

I have based my study on the direct observation of naturally-occurring parent-teacher conversations within an English secondary school. From my search of the literature relating to parent-teacher meetings (section 2.3), it would appear that the last such study was conducted by MacLure and Walker (2000). Given the considerable resources channelled into parent-teacher meetings (section 1.2) and the prominent role that these play in relations between home and school, this would seem to be a significant gap in the research literature. My study thus provides new evidence relating to an important area of educational practice about which little is currently known. Other studies based on parent-teacher conversations have been reported, though these have been conducted outside of the English education system (e.g. Lemmer, 2012), often within early years centres or primary schools (e.g. Tveit, 2009). Whilst providing interesting insights that might be usefully transferred, the findings generated by these studies are not directly applicable to parent-teacher conversations within English secondary schools. Moreover, my study was primarily based on naturally-occurring conversations between parents and teachers, as opposed to data generated through interviews or questionnaires (e.g. Inglis, 2012). This is important since the responses stimulated by a researcher in an arranged setting might not reveal the topics of interest to the participants themselves. Direct recordings are also less prone to distortion or

faulty recollection, and facilitate repeated examination and analysis. For practitioners and researchers with an interest in parent-teacher meetings in English secondary schools, my research has thus generated a bank of relevant, up-to-date and reliable data.

Patterns of talk identified and explained

My study has drawn attention to two features of parent-teacher conversations which do not appear to have been widely reported in the research literature. First, I described in section 5.1.1 how the parents and teachers in my study worked together to modify students' behaviour or learning (Bilton, Jackson and Hymer, 2017b). Such joint action by parents and teachers does not appear to have been reported previously, though Walker (1998) has pointed out that some teachers saw parent-teacher meetings as opportunities to challenge students about their behaviour. This pattern of talk is significant since it shows that, when the student is present, parent-teacher meetings can be occasions when the adult participants do more than merely exchange information. Second, I have pointed out that the parents and teachers in my study were willing to admit their failings and forgive or overlook the shortcomings of others (section 5.1.2). Indeed, they appeared keen to demonstrate their support for one another and to establish friendly relationships. Of the studies I reviewed in section 2.3, only Pillet-Shore (2004; 2015) has reported similar behaviour, though in her later paper she presented this in terms of harm avoidance rather than as an aim in its own right. This pattern of talk is also important since it challenges the notion that parents and

teachers are opponents (section 5.2.3). Additionally, I have provided an alternative explanation for the widely reported control of conversations by teachers. As I noted in section 2.3.4, this behaviour has previously been interpreted in terms of power differences between parents and teachers. In section 5.2.4, however, I suggested that conversational control could be viewed as a defensive strategy used by teachers to avoid loss of 'face'. I also raised the possibility that the teachers in my study may have been controlling conversations in order to fulfil the expectations associated with their perceived role. These explanations have not been previously suggested in the research literature I reviewed in section 2.3 – though the notion of teachers working to meet role expectations would complement Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's model (section 2.2.2) – and have important implications regarding the nature of parent-teacher relationships.

A useful distinction

Pillet-Shore (2004; 2012) has referred to the 'official' and 'unofficial' business of parent-teacher meetings, though in her earlier paper she did not formally define these categories or provide examples to illustrate her meaning. In her later paper, she suggested that, whilst the 'official' business of meetings was for parents and teachers to evaluate the student, they were also 'unofficially' assessing one another. The aims of the parents and teachers in my study, however, were more wide-ranging than this (sections 5.1.1 and 5.1.2), suggesting that Pillet-Shore's categories are too narrowly defined. In my study, I have therefore distinguished between the instrumental and

interpersonal aims of parents and teachers (section 5.1) and illustrated these using examples of actual parent-teacher talk. The instrumental aims of participants are directed towards improving educational outcomes and include the communication of progress-related information to parents and giving advice to students with regard to their learning. By contrast, the interpersonal aims of participants are concerned with meeting their individual needs and do not necessarily relate to the education of students. I would argue that this distinction is useful for both schools and researchers investigating parent-teacher meetings since it places the focus on the actions of parents and teachers and raises important questions for researchers and schools regarding how – if at all – parent-teacher meetings are being used to promote learning (section 6.3). Moreover, the nature of the interpersonal talk which takes place between parents and teachers could also provide researchers with answers to more fundamental questions regarding the nature of the relationships between them.

Challenging existing models

The theoretical perspectives outlined in my literature review cannot fully explain the talk which took place between the parents and teachers in my study. In section 2.2.3, I pointed out that many researchers with an interest in parental involvement advocate equal partnerships between home and school. The adult participants involved in my investigation, however, did not discuss their aims, nor did they share responsibility or engage in meaningful dialogue. They could not, therefore, be considered as equal partners (section 5.2.1). In

section 2.2.5, I explained that some researchers considered conflict to be an unavoidable aspect of parent-teacher relationships. Again, however, I found little evidence to support this view. Indeed, the parents and teachers in my study seemed keen to build friendly relationships and avoid causing one another harm (section 5.2.3). In section 2.2.2, I described a model for parent-teacher interaction based on the notion of education as a free-market. Once more, however, my study has produced little evidence to support this view (section 5.2.2). The parents in my study did not make requests or advocate on behalf of their children, nor did the teachers attempt to market the school. Of the various perspectives from which parent-teacher relationships can be viewed, the 'layperson-expert' model (section 2.2.2) agrees most closely with my findings. Evidence to support this claim comes from the tendency for the parents in my study to act as passive receivers of information and allow teachers to control the conversation. However, the teachers involved in my investigation did not engage in advice-giving or goal-setting – as might be expected within this model (section 5.2.4). The evidence generated by my research thus questions models of parent-teacher interaction based on the notions of partnership (e.g. Epstein, 1987), opposition (Lareau, 1987) or market forces (McNamara et al., 2000) and supports Jeynes' (2011) call for new theories (section 2.2.6). This is a significant contribution to the research literature since these models are well-established and have been widely used by researchers within the field of parental involvement for several decades.

7.3 Concluding Thoughts

In the paper that sparked my initial interest in parent-teacher conversations, MacLure and Walker (2000) highlighted a lack of understanding regarding the complex ways in which parents and teachers interact during their meetings. During my review of the research literature, however, I found no subsequent studies based on the direct observation of conversations in English schools. This was unexpected given the prevalence of parent-teacher meetings and the demands that they place on both families and schools. In seeking answers to my research questions, I have thus contributed towards a field of enquiry that has received surprisingly little attention in recent years. Indeed, I would argue that my investigation has extended MacLure and Walker's earlier work and generated findings which will be of practical use to both researchers and schools. With regard to the aims of parents and teachers, my study has revealed a pattern of behaviour that does not appear to have been reported in the literature and which calls into question the purpose of parent-teacher meetings. I have also highlighted the possibility that the educational needs of students are not the primary concern for parents and teachers when they meet face-to-face. Regarding parent-teacher relationships, my research has generated evidence to challenge existing perspectives and called attention to a theoretical framework that other researchers may find useful. However, a small-scale investigation such as mine, whilst making important contributions, must necessarily be limited in scope – there is much that remains to be known. Further research will be needed if schools to make better use of parent-teacher meetings. Should my study have stimulated others to pursue

such investigations or prompted schools to reconsider their approach, then I will consider my efforts to have been well spent.

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Appendix A: Conferences and Other Professional Outputs

'Playing Games in the School Hall: Explaining Parent-Teacher Conversations', *Doctoral Colloquium*, University of Cumbria, Lancaster campus, 14th July 2016

'Not Just Communication: Parent-Teacher Meetings in an English Secondary School', *Research Institute for Professional Learning in Education (RIPLE) Conference*, University of Cumbria, Carlisle campus, 10th May 2016

'The Point of Parents' Evenings: What do Parents and Teachers Want to Achieve?', *in-service training session*, ***** school, Cumbria, 4th September 2015

'Parents' Evening Conversations: Who said What in the School Hall', *in-service training session*, ***** school, Cumbria, 2nd September 2014

'Understanding "talk" using discourse analysis', *Research Institute for Professional Learning in Education (RIPLE) conference*, University of Cumbria, Carlisle campus, 18th June 2014

'Successful for Whom? An Account of an Action Research Project Aiming to Improve Home-School Communication', *Research Institute for Professional Learning in Education (RIPLE) conference*, University of Cumbria, Carlisle campus, 23rd May 2013

Appendix B: Transcription notation

Derived from Jefferson's full system – see, for example, Wetherell (1998).

Line numbers are included for reference, and the following abbreviations have been used throughout: T = teacher; M = mother; F = father; S = student.

*****	Specific name of an individual or place
(.)	Just noticeable pause
(0.3) (2.3)	Examples of exactly timed pauses, in seconds.
.hh hh	Speaker's in-breath and out-breath respectively.
wo(h)rd	'Laughter' within words
end.	Full stop (period) denotes falling, ending intonation.
word?	Question mark depicts rising, questioning intonation.
£words£	Pound signs enclose talk said in "smile voice".
cu-	A sharp cut-off of a prior word or sound.
lo:ng	Stretching of the preceding sound.
(word)	Transcriber's guess at an unclear part of the tape.
run=on	Material that runs on
<u>under</u>	Emphasis using volume and/or pitch.
°soft°	Speech noticeably quieter than the surrounding talk.
>fast<	Talk noticeably quicker than the surrounding talk
over [lap]	Overlapping talk
[over]	
↑word	The onset of a noticeable pitch rise
↓word	The onset of a noticeable pitch descent